A Lancer
Science Fiction
Original

Overlay

Barry N. Malzberg

Earth lay helpless before
the alien invader . . . but for the
Power of one lone Earthman.

THOUGHTS OF AN ALIEN INVADER . . .

Seen from the outside, all of these minds are the same. Inside, however, the variation is splendid: no two of them alike, no three in concordance, a range of opinion, response, personality, superstition, which is truly astonishing because it does congeal around a point of shared rage. Rage and instinct.

At the moment I occupy four minds. All of them employ the same rhetoric, none differ in degree of ambition . . . but nonetheless the range is extraordinary. The sprawl! The conflicts! The holy, holy differences! And I selected them all at random. That such diversity could breed unity—this is the terror of it . . .

A LANCER BOOK

This novel is for Robert and Ruth Schlesinger and for Robert P. Hoskins

Science fiction by Barry N. Malzberg
BEYOND APOLLO
THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS
OVERLAY

Science fiction by K. M. O'Donnell
DWELLERS IN THE DEEP
THE EMPTY PEOPLE
FINAL WAR AND OTHER FANTASIES
GATHER IN THE HALL OF THE PLANETS
IN THE POCKET AND OTHER S. F. STORIES
UNIVERSE DAY

Overlay

Barry N. Malzberg

A LANCER BOOK • NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK

OVERLAY

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TWO EPIGRAPHS FOR HORSEPLAYERS

. . . He had had an unusually bad day at the flats and now, as he left the track disconsolately, a small voice seemed to whisper to the horseplayer: *go to the trots, go to the trots.* He was most astounded because nothing like this had ever happened to him before but he resolved to follow the advice and see what would happen. Arriving at Yonkers, he purchased a program and took a position by the rail, waiting confidently for the voice to address him again. Three minutes before first-race post it did. *Bet number five,* the voice counselled and without hesitation, the punter bought five ten dollar win tickets on that horse. He then watched with delight as number five paced home an easy winner, paying $52.80.

. . . It continued that way all evening, the voice waiting until near post to whisper its selections, the horseplayer following them in parley until, just before the ninth, he had over seventy-five thousand dollars which, in response to instructions, he sent in on number three. Driven down to 1-2 by this enormous bet, three broke at the start and trailed the field throughout, losing by ten or fifteen lengths.

Stunned, shattered, the horseplayer collapsed over the rail, waiting for the voice to explain itself. At long last it

did. *Son of a bitch,* the voice said in wee small tones, *son of a bitch.*

by permission of Howard Rowe

"*Clocker Lawton* we have sinned. *Clocker Powell* we have failed utterly, we are washed in the colors of our inequity. Oh *New York Turf Letter, Top Turf,* we have gone astray; plunged into a sea of darkness; we have lost our way. We have forgotten the lessons of the Fathers: no fillies against colts; no maidens in straight claimers; no workout line, no bet. We have been greedy. We have chased longshots. We have failed to learn the awful lessons of the tote. Verily we say unto you that we have lost our way, we are utterly cast aside, our bones are made to run out like sealing wax. Faith of our Fathers, Word of the Prophets, we are lost and cannot be found. In the dread machinery of the tote we faint from sickness, pray for your blessings. Oh may your mercy find us again and may we never stray from thy teachings, thy sacred Word until restored again to the freshness of our youth, we play and gambol like lambs on the fields of desire."

The Loser's Litany

FIRST PROLOGUE

In the year 1978 (433 Galactic) the attention of the Bureau fell to the planet Earth which, Headquarters decided, had reached a point where it furnished a clear and present danger to the cause of Galactic Unity. With some regret, tempered by a long and hard-bought sense of bureaucratic anomie, a plan was put into operation to rid the sector of the menace by sowing the seeds of disunity within.

SECOND PROLOGUE

Calamity. Or cataclysm. The implications of entropy seem to dominate the universe, all drive and desire to the contrary. Vanity, vanity, and so forth. Of course it is hard to be precise about this; not as precise, in any event, as one would like to be. Perhaps the basic problem is that I am simpleminded; I give myself credit for potential which never existed. I cannot be blamed for this; it is a natural error. My position in the Bureau, after all this time, would certainly hint toward that explanation.

On the other hand, I would still like to believe that I have been the victim of inequities, terrible inequities—politics and maneuvering, cunning and deceit, manipulation and torment—and that in the long run, all of this will come clear. I am still young, relatively speaking. My career in its richness lies ahead of me. There will be other opportunities, assignments more worth taking seriously than this, demanding my best.

Assignments. Beyond calamity, assignments. A one to one ratio of devastation and manipulation which would be depressing if I did not feel that fighting the battle against entropy was the Good Fight. We must conquer malevolence, mindless breakdown, social fragmentation. By using them on the point of origin. Blight. The obliter-

ation of destiny. Every living being, every social unit has a moral right to. Its own extension and so on. Granted this and granted that. Taking into account. As you can see, I am quoting verbatim but with certain gaps and inaccuracies. Fortunately, rote memory is not necessary in this job. We may refer to procedure when it is needed.

"The next one is a tough one," Hemmings said. (His name is not Hemmings and he did not really say this, but I am looking for equivalents in pursuit of communication. I do not want to make jargon of these notes. What good would it do to describe what Hemmings looks like or the method by which he communicates? The important thing is to achieve a dry universality, a point of common approach. Perhaps I should point out as well that I have no idea as to why I have decided to embark upon this diary. Agents are supposed to leave no written testaments to their mission, even when it is highly unlikely—as in this case—that our symbols will ever be discovered and interpreted. I could get into serious trouble at Headquarters were they to ever discover that I have decided to record. On the other hand, who cares about Headquarters at this time? The situation has become progressively mindless and deteriorative. Those bastards couldn't possibly understand what is going on here. One must learn to Follow the Right.)

"These people are dangerous and insane," Hemmings said. "The polarities, the constants, the projections, and so on, all of this would indicate that within a very short amount of time, even by our standards, they will pose a real menace. We have to stop this, of course. Onward! We must protect our interests and so on. Unity!"

"Of course," I said deferentially. (Deference is one of my assets: I owe much of my reputation in the Bureau to my ability to be deferential without obsequity. Obsequious without deference. It is all a question of semantics.) "I've already done some reading in the case folder. Dan-

gerous people. They appear to have a real streak of malevolence accompanying their dangerous technology. That makes them doubly fearful."

"Well, not the malevolence itself," Hemmings said. "Malevolence isn't quite a constant, you know. You'd have to virtually admit a construct of diabolism to make that work and, as far as we understand, they fail now to accept diabolism. Instead, they've settled for a weak causality. Explication of all acts through consequence and so on. Actually, and this is rather frightening, they tend to consider themselves basically good. Perhaps it's the pantheistic instinct once again; you tend to find it in these limited cultures."

(We tend to talk in sophistries at the Bureau perhaps more than is truly good for us. Perhaps this has to do with the rather simple and dreadful nature of our work as well as its mechanical overtone. More will be said of this later, I think, if I get around to it.)

"You want me to break down the institutions, of course," I said. "Get into the core and concentrate on the devastating urges which lie at the center of their behavior." (We also try to get into the center of issues without dissembling. There are so many cases, so many caseworkers, so few supervisors that we must cultivate efficiency. In a way, I am very proud of the Bureau. It struggles against difficult odds and does a fine job.)

"More or less," Hemmings said. "There's a rather special overcast to this assignment, however. As far as I can see, we'll have to get into this rather unconventionally. Attempting to buckle them through the rational devices won't work; they're too technocratic, and their mores—or those which they think are the mores—are totally insane. So we have to approach them from the edges, concentrate on mysticism, spirituality, the occult, the irrational. That's the only way to topple them. You go in through the approved institutions and they'll eat you up alive.

They're more insane now than we could possibly make them."

"That means a subpopulation."

"Exactly. As it so happens, they have a very convenient subpopulation which is exactly suited for this kind of work. That makes things much easier for us. Through this subpopulation, their energizing I should say and its manipulation, you can work in toward the center and bring the whole thing down very quickly. They'd be most vulnerable to this type of approach."

"A subpopulation involved with mysticism, the occult, and the irrational," I said. "I suppose that you want me to become immersed in their reform politics."

"Well, not exactly," Hemmings said. "The fact is that, as I told you, their most insane devices are considered to be supremely rational—by them. That wouldn't work at all; you'd only make the structure appear more solid. No, we've carved out the proper element with which you're to deal. We have it all written down on these charts and so on, a selected bias, research, collation, etc. All that you have to do is to go to work on them within the limited scope. Plan D, I suppose. Or perhaps Plan E. It's all relative. You'll have to use some judgment."

"Good enough," I said. "What is this subpopulation?"

"Well, I don't exactly know what their *name* is," Hemmings said, tilting back and casting a wistful arc of smoke toward the ceiling. (No arc, no smoke, no ceiling but I am still hustling equivalents: familiarity must be preserved in these wretched circumstances, goddamn it.) "But I can tell you what they call themselves and then go on from there."

"What is that?"

"Horseplayers," Hemmings said. "The subpopulation calls itself horseplayers."

"Horseplayers?"

"That's the appellation used."

"Horseplayers. That means they—"

"Play horses," Hemmings finished. "Of course, they don't consider it exactly play."

This is the origin of the peculiar circumstance in which I now find myself. I have the feeling that my time here is distinctly limited; likewise these circumstances which are wretched, foul, dealing for the most part with a series of furnished rooms outfitted with stacks and stacks of desiccate racing newspapers or "tipsheets" from which all power comes but which smell (I have the sense) terrible and cast an added gloom over the entire operation. For these reasons, I will try to cultivate a seemly brusqueness, an artistic conciseness, as I move toward the heart of the matter.

Which yet, I do not understand.

What is this *doing* to me?

CHAPTER I

Simmons. Simmons the horseplayer. Let us consider him for the moment if we might. He is leaning against the rail at Aqueduct, surrounded (he feels) by wheeling birds and doom, clutching a handful of losing parimutuel tickets in his left hand. His right hand is occupied with his hair; he is trying ceaselessly to comb it into place, a nervous gesture which caused one of his drinking companions (he has no friends) to call him years ago, Simmons the Dresser, a nickname which, unfortunately, never stuck since his other drinking companions knew his habits too well.

It is 1:43 now, some twelve minutes before scheduled post time for the second race and Simmons is desperately seeking information from the tote board. He has already lost the first race. The results posted indicate that the horse on which he bet finished third. Simmons did not have the horse to show or across the board. He is a win bettor only, some years ago having read in a handicapping book that only the win bettor has a chance to retain an edge and that place and show were for amateurs and old ladies. He does not know who wrote this book or where it is today but ever since he read this information, he has never bet other than to win. He is not sure whether or not this has made much difference but in-

tends to draw up some statistics sooner or later. He keeps a careful record of his struggles; the fact is though that he never totals. (For those who are interested I say that Simmons has lost slightly less than he might have otherwise lost had he bet place and show, but the difference in percentage terms is infinitesimal and the psychological benefits of having had more tickets to cash would have well outweighed the insignificant additional losses.)

Simmons has, then, blown the first race. He has, for that matter, lost seven races in a row, going back to the third yesterday, a dash for two-year maiden fillies that produced a seven-length victory for an odds-on favorite. Simmons collected $7.50 for his $5.00 ticket on that one. Before then there is also a succession of losing races, although here, perhaps, Simmons loses his sense of precision. He is not exactly sure how many races he has recently lost or how long the losing streak has gone on. All that he can suggest at this moment is that he is deeply into what he has popularly termed a Blue Period and that his situation will have to markedly change for the better shortly or he will be forced to the most serious and investigatory questions about his life and career. Such as, what is he doing here? And what did he hope to gain? And why did he make that famous decision some months ago to have it over and done with the horses once and for all and to make them pay for his psychological investments? And so on. Simmons will phrase these questions to himself in a low, frenetic mumble, somewhere midway between sotto voce and a sustained shriek and those people in his presence at the time the inquiries begin, will look at him peculiarly or not at all, depending upon custom or interest. If he chooses to ask them of himself at the track, he will incite no response at all. There are, after all, so many questioners at the track. The churches—and I intuit a little of this subject—have

nothing to compare with the track in the metaphysical area.

"Sons of bitches," Simmons says, but he says this without conviction or hope; it is merely a transitional statement in the category of throat-clearing or manipulation of the genitals and means, hence, absolutely nothing. The fact is that Simmons is not clear as to the identity of the sons of bitches, and if he were confronted by them now or several races in the future, he would not quite know what to say. Manners would overcome reason. "You could have helped me a little with that four horse in the first," he would probably point out mildly, or, "Gee, I wish that that kid on my eight horse in yesterday's starter-handicap had tried to stay out of the switches." Overall, an apologetic tone would certainly extrude. The fact is—and it is important that we understand our focus at the outset—that Simmons is both mild and polite; also, that he expects little beyond what he has already received and that when he is talking about the sons of bitches—well, it would be naive and simplistic to say that he refers mainly to himself, but as one who is extremely close to that situation, I can suggest that part of this is valid. (Part of it is not. Everything is irretrievably complex. This must be kept carefully in mind here. The distance between a winning and tail-end horse in the average field is, at the most, five seconds—five seconds upon which rests the ascription of all hope and, in certain cases, the actual lives of these creatures. One must be respectful of any institution which can so carefully narrow the gap between intimation and disaster.)

"Sons of bitches," Simmons says again and opens the copy of the morning *Telegraph* which he is holding to full arm's length and begins to look, with neither anticipation nor intensity, at the experts' selection for the second race. Because this is both a Thrusday and cloudy,

Simmons is able to perform this gesture, articulate his feelings, in isolation and quiet; there is no one within several yards of him in any direction. The fact is, although he would find it painful to admit this, that Simmons despises company for private reasons and is able to find his fullest sense of identity only at the racetrack precisely because it both heightens and renders somehow sinister his sense of isolation. He knows that he would never be able to get away with his rhetoric in a social or subway situation, and he would not dare to do it in his room because he has long been conditioned to the belief (alas!) that any man who talks to himself in his own quarters is probably insane.

"Ah, there's no goddamn percentage," Simmons now mutters, as he looks at the *Telegraph*. As always, this ominous newspaper renders him little comfort since its selectors, like all selectors everywhere, are oriented toward favorites or logical choices and tell him only what a sane, conservative advisor (Simmons envisions him as a portly man who inhabits the clubhouse, has a mild cardiac condition, and calls all trainers Willie) would offer if this advisor were, for some reason to take an interest in Simmons and his plight and attempt to turn the situation around. Simmons, who once wanted exactly such a friend, now hates the spector of the Advisor, feels that the Advisor—like *Clocker Lawton*, *Clocker Rowe*, and *Clocker Powell*—simultaneously embodies and parodies everything about successful followers of racing that he has come to hate and feels that he might as well kill him on sight as not. He has, therefore, transferred his revulsion to the selector pages, which he now turns away from with a moan. He goes instead to the past performances which he regards with a glazed and horrified expression as he comes slowly to understand that he has seen them all before, most of the

night in fact, and that he knows less about these horses than he did at the beginning.

For the first time (this afternoon) it occurs to Simmons that he might be losing his mind. Meanwhile, the bugler walks to the front of the paddock and blows that call to indicate that the jockeys are to mount their horses. It is almost time for the field in the second race to come out.

Simmons has lost twenty dollars on the first race. He has lost two hundred and sixty dollars during his most recent losing streak. He has lost $1,680 (plus expenses) since he made his Career Decision some three months and sixteen days ago. I offer these statistics without prejudice and only because, unlike Simmons, I am in a position to amass them, reconcile them with a larger scheme of possibilities, and see them in what might be tastefully called an overall perspective. Therefore, they cause me neither pain nor pleasure to recite. Simmons, on the other hand, confronted by these figures would be unable to speak them distinctly. I am not saying that my position (I have discovered this with some surprise) is necessarily superior to that of Simmons. Unlike him, I take almost no emotions from event, this being, I am led to understand by the Headquarters briefs, a defect in their terms. I hold my own judgment in abeyance. Certainly Simmons, in the short time that I have dwelt with him, has taught me a great deal.

Now he sighs, mutters, stretches, curses. He wishes, of course, to make a bet on the second race (he always bets on every race, being unable to cope with the fear that he would otherwise know of missing out on the Ultimate Coup) but has no firm choice; he cannot, pity him, arrive at that careful, judicious balance of speed, windage, condition, manipulation, desire, weight, and intrinsic class which is the key to approaching the variables of even the

cheapest claiming sprint. Or, as he would put it, he cannot seem to get an edge. It is at this moment, therefore, that I decide to make my entrance; seeing little enough profit in delay and realizing that the Simmons who needs my help at 1:46 may have a definite superiority over the Simmons who would reject it at 3:10. For the fact is that I see already the pattern of Simmons's last thrashings and it is not pleasant. (Which is not to say that I cannot stage-manage it. Only a Simmons could think that the unpleasant is necessarily disastrous.)

"Look," I say without introduction, "do you want a play in this race? I think I can give you something interesting."

"Oh boy," Simmons says, looking up and then rapidly down toward his newspaper. (I should point out that this is not the first time I have approached him so abruptly, but he is still finding it difficult to adjust to my presence.) "Oh God, it isn't you again, is it?" Simmons's initial resistance toward my appearance has been somewhat blunted, but the fact remains that he finds me almost unbearable. While his hold on sanity (I can attest) has never been in the least precarious, Simmons thinks that it is and that I am a manifestation of his breakdown. I have made progress in this area but not quite enough. "I just don't want to listen," he says and covers his ears. Perhaps he is thinking of blinkers. "I don't want to hear any more of it. Losing is one thing but this . . ."

"Nonsense," I say and then address him with enormous tact and personal force. The covering of the ears means nothing. "We don't have time for overlong discussions, and besides, I must warn you that unless you take some good advice quickly, you will be verging on a truly massive disaster, one with overtones of violence and a sense of intrinsic loss more acute than any you have ever known. I am afraid that I must get to the simple gist of this: bet the three horse, win and place."

"Oh no," Simmons says again but obediently. (There is an enormous and satisfying submission to all horse-players because the fact is that they need to be told exactly what to do. He opens the newspaper to the past performances and looks at the horse in question. "Make Peace?" he says. "The number three horse, Make Peace?"

"That's the one I say," and partake of the sensations of his finger against the newsprint. The faint impression of type slides across his skin with an almost erotic smoothness. I can understand what is erroneously called the power of the printed word. "Win and place. Place and win." I articulate distinctly. My time, after all, is not unlimited.

"But that's ridiculous," Simmons says. "This horse is already thirty-five to one on the board. He's the only maiden in the race. He hasn't shown a thing since February at Bowie and that was in a claimer two thousand dollars less than this one. The French bastard who's riding him stinks, the trainer is in a bad losing streak, and if that ain't bad enough, the weight is the heaviest in the race. I don't see it. I just don't see it." (It is well known that with such rationalizations about his marriage, Simmons walked out of his home several years ago and never returned. For this reason, and others, I do not take his rationalizations seriously.)

"Reason enough," I say. "He doesn't figure. That's the point I was trying to develop. It wouldn't be a good tip if it were logical, would it?"

At this moment, the bugler blows the second call and our conversation is halted. We stand in almost companionable quiet while the announcement is made and the horses come onto the track, some of them with a curious, skipping gait which indicates incipient lameness, others with a somnolent prance which might indicate either good spirits or the presence of undetectable drugs. The seven horse, a brown six-year-old gelding, moves some-

what ahead of the field and comes toward us, turns at a point in front of our section of the rail and then, with some encouragement from outrider and jockey, both of whom are singing, breaks into a sidewise gallop which quickly carries him past the finish line and out of sight along the backstretch. The other horses follow less eagerly and at a cautious distance.

"Front bandages," Simmons says. "Front *and* rear. And he seemed a little rank, too. I don't know. I just don't know. Look, look: he's fifty to one." In his rising excitement—this is, to be sure, the very first tip I have given him, although on previous occasions I have gone so far as to offer advanced handicapping advice—his hostility has vanished and his very disbelief seems to wave like a sheet between us, punched with enough holes for random communication. "Ah, it's crazy, it's crazy," he says. "I mean, I'm willing to listen to anyone but I just don't see it. Fifty to one." The tote winks. "*Sixty* to one. Do you think—"

"I do not think," I say. "By the way, I can't talk any longer," and add something about probability currents and cross-angles of time which Simmons is expected to find obscure and to ignore. I leave him rapidly and in such a state of elemental self-absorption that I know he will hardly detect my absence and then only with an abstracted glare. For the fact is that I have put Simmons on to something.

As the horses gather in the upper stretch to talk things over a bit before getting into the dreaded starting gate (I am also privy to the emotions of horses, limited creatures but none the less poignant, at least to themselves), Simmons turns and begins to move at his own sidewise canter toward the pari-mutuel windows. Together we join a short line of ragged men, most of them pallid, who shuffle their feet and clutch their wallets while their duplicates ahead pass the windows and scurry by, looking

at the tickets they have bought with wonder. It is the ten-dollar window, an excellent sign in itself, because Simmons does almost all of his business at the two- and five-dollar slots. He does this, as he once explained to me, not because he wagers little but because he simply feels more comfortable at these more modest windows. Perhaps it is a question of his heritage or only the class system at work. In any event, it is a fact—and I have witnessed this—that once Simmons bet fifty dollars on a filly to win and did so at the two-dollar window in the form of twenty-five tickets. He simply feels more in place there, the clerk's glare to the contrary. In that case, incidentally, the horse won, profiting Simmons fifty-five dollars, something which he considered an excellent omen as well as a sign that his humility had been observed and respected in Higher Quarters. Nevertheless, he is now on the ten dollar line.

"Got anything?" the man behind him asks in response to a certain stimulus which I have implanted midway between the medulla oblongata and the vas deferens. I am curious about the degree of confidentiality which Simmons feels invested in our relationship. But I have not been cautious, technically, and there is a terrifying moment during which I fear the questioner might faint. Fortunately, he does not, but the reasons he has worked out for betting the eight horse are now and will remain irrevocably wiped from his mind.

"Nothing," Simmons mutters, "oh all right, the six, the six. Just got a tip out of the infield but I don't know if it's worth a damn. I'll stab, though." For an instant I feel a jolt of disorientation: has Simmons misunderstood me or already forgotten the advice? But then as he comes to the window, I understand that he is only being what he takes to be very cunning, and as he leans over he makes the clerk lip-read the word *three*. He has decided then to posture as a deaf-mute in order to protect his informa-

tion, and this is safe since no ten-dollar clerk at this track has ever before seen him. As he now mouths, "Three ten times," the clerk returns that timeless embracing nod of one who has seen everything (this look is also available in whorehouses but then only on reservation and for special customers) and punches out ten tickets. Simmons, the recent deaf-mute, puts down a hundred dollar bill, leaving him with only a couple of dollars and change, and takes the tickets, cupping them so that the man behind cannot see, and then moves to the rear of the line. Pausing there he verifies the number as he always does (although his losing streak has now reached such proportions that when races are over he finds himself reaching for his tickets and praying that the clerk has made a mistake or that he, Simmons, has begun to lose his vision and did not verify properly). Then he returns slowly toward his place on the rail, pausing for a brief cup of coffee which he does not taste, although he can distinctly hear the clerk cursing him for not leaving the change from a quarter. I understand with disgust that Simmons will not visit the place windows, preferring to back up his bet with insistence rather than circumspection. It is an old failing.

The rail is slightly more crowded now with only two minutes to post, but sufficiently uninhabited at the edges that he is able to leave out the yardage which he feels he needs as he prepares himself for the running. As he curls his hair, wipes his forehead (although it is a cool day), runs a left hand absently over his genitals, his inner wrist catching the comforting bulge of the tickets in his trouser pocket, he begins a thin, shrieking monologue which he believes to be private although, of course, I am privy to every word. I listen to it with relish, delighted as always to see that my effects upon Simmons have not been imperceptible and that now as in the past (and in the imponderable future as well) I have the capacity to

move him. Of course I have had to change many of my devices and manipulations in order to do so but the synapses are well covered, and it is this, along with a few other things, that gives me hope. If I have possessed Simmons to this degree, then there is absolutely no saying how effective the mission might be, and, in the bargain, I have been able to keep abreast of his development. This is no mean accomplishment since Simmons has been even more variable within the last couple of weeks than in the past. (I refuse to believe that my presence has had anything at all to do with this.)

"Oh you bastards," Simmons is saying, "oh you bastards, *please*, please give me this one; it's so little to ask. A hundred dollars, seventy to one now, that's seven thousand, just seven thousand dollars. What's the difference? Who cares? What difference would it make to the bastards if I won? Favorites can lose, longshots win. Longshots win big. Everyone gets out sooner or later, later or sooner. Oh God, give me just this once and never again. The three, the three, just once the three. What difference does it make to you, you dirty sons of bitches? But think of the difference it makes to *me*: a new chance, a new life, well, maybe the old life but certainly better, a *lot* better, I deserve it. Oh give this one to me now. Forty to one. Big drop. Here comes the money. Oh God, four thousand dollars, maybe more, never less. Oh please, please; it won't cost you a thing but think of what it means to me!"

There are two aspects to this monologue which I find objectionable. The first is that the main thrust of Simmons's appeal is to the sons of bitches rather than to the one who gave him the tip—that is to say me. The second is that Simmons knows as well as I that were he to win four thousand dollars he would have no more idea of what to do with it than as to what to do with the hundred he has just bet. It is various and peculiar, but it is

the very perversity of Simmons, and by inference of all these creatures, which has so involved me and made them—*pace*, Headquarters!—sympathetic in my eyes. Who other than themselves would have ever conceived them?

In any event, Simmons is now barely coherent. "Oh, I picked him for God's sake, let me know that I still have my wits about me!" He moans and this, as everything else, I try to find amusing. It is not the fact that my tip has been so rapidly transmuted into judgment that titillates. No, it is something else; it has to do with the certainty of Simmons's conviction that massive things now work in the balance. This is an emotion only fully apprehensible at the racetrack, although other situations occasionally come close. None of those situations I have noticed, however, are at all accessible to what Simmons or I would think of as the "working class."

It is now post time. No, it is some seconds after post time, one of the horses in the gate having clearly, to Simmons's anguished but farsighted gaze, unseated his jockey. "Oh God, not the three, not number three!" Simmons pleads and the announcer says, "That's number one, Cinnamon Roll, unseating the rider." And Simmons gives a gasp of relief as the announcer adds, "That's Cinnamon Roll now running off from the gate." "Oh boy," Simmons says as several patrons to his right and left begin to spew curses at the same time extracting tickets from shirt pockets which they regard with loathing. Cinnamon Roll is the 7-5 favorite, as one glance at the tote quickly affirms. "I really can't stand this," Simmons says to no one in particular and bangs an elbow into the mesh, giving him enough distracting pain to keep him functioning while the outriders meanwhile recover number one, gently urge her toward the gate, stand guard while the jockey remounts, and then tenderly pat the

horse into position. The grandstand mutters angrily; they feel that the horse should have been scratched for medical reasons. But Simmons himself is beyond judgments; he has moved into an abyss of feeling so profound that only the announcer's statement that the horses are out of the gate is able to move him to passion.

The effect of this is, however, galvanic and would surprise anyone in the vicinity of the ten-dollar window who had decided to take a tip from the mute. "Oh you bastards, here you come!" he says with conviction, a sidewise glance at the board now informing him that the horse is at least ninety to one. "Oh boy," he says, "come on, come on, get me out of this. *Come on!*" his voice winding its way up the scale during the final words and impressing me, as it always has, with Simmons's utter lack of obscenity under stress situations. It all falls away in the same fashion, I understand, that soldiers in mortal danger of their lives or with broken morale, are apt to curse somewhat less than a cross section of the Mothers Superior. Obscenity, according to those studies with which I am familiar, occurs only during the relative contentment of hope and tends to vanish when the stresses become evident. "Oh please," says Simmons, and clasps his hands prettily.

(Once, Simmons had made a resolve to not address horses or jockeys during the running of races. He came to this decision on the basis that he was trying to be businesslike and participating in an investment program not dissimilar to stocks and bonds. Did brokers or customers, he wondered, scream curses at the ticker and shake their fists wildly when old IBM went up at dawn? Of course they did not, so neither would he. This resolve had lasted four races, until Lopez had done something really disastrous with a longshot who was caused to bear in on the rail, and from that time on Simmons has com-

forted himself with the new certainty that without air conditioning, all brokers would work in their undershirts.)

The horses come toward the stretch turn. It is difficult to pick up the call in the midst of the shouting and difficult as well to see the numbers of the leading horses as flashed on the tote board because of the angle. It is for this very reason—a sense of rising mystery during a race, all possibilities enacted until the deadly, final knowledge—that Simmons has elected this for his vantage point. But now, past all shrieking, his voice is only a terrified whisper as he says, "What's going on?" Hurling himself half over the rail, he is able to see the race for the first time—and he cannot spot the three horse. Four is on the lead and seven outside of it coming on. The three must be behind another horse on the rail; either that or it has adjourned from the gate because, as the horses pass, he is quite unable to see it. "Please," Simmons begs as he watches the field scuttle from him. There are diminishing cries in the distance and then a silence so deep and white that it could turn flowering acres into glowing bone.

Numbers come on the tote which Simmons is unable to see. After a time—and it is a considerable time, for the horses must return to the paddock to be unsaddled and the jockeys must weigh in, but for Simmons there is no sense of chronology whatsoever—the announcer says that the race is official and reads off the money horses. The three finishes third which is a remarkable showing for a ninety-to-one shot. Only one ninety-to-one shot out of ten beats even a third of its field; this one has beaten fully three-quarters.

I point this out to Simmons in a mild, apologetic tone. "It was rather remarkable, you've got to admit that," I say, "and you could have had the show bet which inci-

dentally paid only eighty sixty due to the two favorites running in."

Simmons says nothing. He is beyond modest mathematical calculation. Instead, he is shaking his head, up and down, his neck constricting, his brow bulging, his eyes fluttering. He appears to be entering a period of sea change, or at any rate it seems to be Simmons Transmuted which I see before me: an older, wiser, infinitely altered Simmons who looks at me with compassion and loathing intermingled. As palms spread before me (figuratively) I back away, apologizing for my faulty information, my impulsiveness, my overextended and already-familiar desire to please my landlords. My suspicion is that I too have become a compulsive gambler—even though I had reasons for this.

But after a long time, Simmons says something in a low voice, and it is difficult for me to distinguish it for a moment. Then the words seem to explode through me with the force of a grenade, or perhaps I am thinking of a waterfall (my taste for metaphor being as faulty as my way with horses). Nevertheless, I find that I am drenched in knowledge, swaying, gasping, so moved that I am virtually inarticulate—and then the silence further deepens as we plunge toward Saturday's True and Final Disaster and the wondrously grim events of the deservedly famous Last Descent which will then begin.

"You can't win them all," Simmons says.

CHAPTER II

First Recitatif: Seen from the outside, all of these minds are the same, leading to the unfortunate stereotype, the steady delimitation of outlook so common to the sport, etc., and all of this composing another in that series of humiliations which must be suffered by the "horseplayers" of this good brown Earth. Inside, however, it is something else entirely as only I would know. The variation of these minds is splendid: no two of them alike, no three of them in concordance, a range of opinion, response, personality, superstition, which is truly astonishing, the more so because it does congeal around a point of shared rage. Rage and instinct. That is where it all begins.

"Consider, gentlemen: at the moment I occupy four minds. All of them employ the same rhetoric, all have similar "goals", none of them differ in degree of ambition ultimate from the others—but, nonetheless, the range is extraordinary. The one revolves around small angles, small plans, the other around devastation and its personal impact, the other yet around prophecies and admixtures (she sees omens in the weather, to say nothing of the amalgam of glances she imagines herself to gain from post-bound jockeys), another around a certain eclecticism combining scatology, theology, sexual perver-

sion, and certain sociological constructs which make no sense to the outsider and yet seem to form a compelling statement for the one so afflicted. And so on. And so forth. The sprawl! The conflicts! The holy, holy difference! And I selected them all at random in the bargain! That such diversity could breed unity; that such a unity could come from coincidence. Any four would have been the same. This is the terror of it.

Terror! Terror! A reflective individual (and I must use that term advisedly) could do worse than to spend the rest of his years with the seeking of correlative coefficient and conflicts among this breed. Unfortunately, I do not have the time.

No, I do not have the time. My mission is specific rather than general, goal-linked, highly motivated, and will work toward a visible conclusion.

(It is hard to control their language. It is so clumsy and imprecise, further, that subvariation, English, with which I struggle is particularly wretched since a given word or phrase may have ten meanings or more depending upon context. "He rode the mare," for instance, does not mean the same as "he rode the mayor." "He got trapped on the rail" is opposed to "he railed at the entrapment." There are individuals here, believe it or not, who devote a substantial proportion of their time to language, either its expression or analysis, and it is understandable, granted their poor equipment, why language alone should underlie so many of their problems. They simply do not know what they are talking about.)

Bear with me. I cannot justify these digressions but find them uncontrollable: there is so very much to record —now that I have decided to break the policy—and so little time to do it; one must, so to speak, seize the moment. The hour? The time? It does not matter. Were I more organized, I would not be in this post in the first place, would doubtless be comfortably ensconced in the

Bureau passing on the work of wretched hacks like this undersigned who, because they lack discipline and seniority, are forced to perform the, uh, field work.

No time, no time. It is the feeling of *disaster* which so overwhelms at this time, so inexplicable and yet in its oppressive weight and dimension hinting at a veracity that cannot be avoided. A feeling of enclosure, of the most inexpressible *limitation*, the lurkings of a devastation so complete as to sink without trace not only those well-meaning individuals whom I tenant but the *occupant* himself and at the end of it—

Enough of this. To facts and the clear basic extrinsics of event from which all real conclusion will come. (Do it, I said to Tony this morning, do it, do it, you know you want to so much so go ahead because you have the right.) Everything is under control and will remain so. (He looked at me, his face pale as a shadow roll and said, I'm afraid. I want to but I can't. No fear, I said, the fear all comes from inside, they can't do a thing to you. And I know he will do it.) Lacking physiognomy, I have no emotional liability. Lacking presence I am not culpable. Lacking form, I am free. Remember this, remember this. . . .

All of them are waking now, turning toward the dawn which comes in lurking slowly from the direction of Ozone Park. It will soon be Saturday, June 4, 1978. Belmont Day. The third jewel of the triple crown at a mile and a half for three year olds.

CHAPTER III

Mary. Consider now Mary. (She will insert the fuses.) The room is full of bags and bags; bags and tipsheets that is to say. On the near wall are lined the bags which she uses both for shopping and accumulation, some of them still filled with the evening's pickings, others clean and reconstituted for later adventures. The bags are stencilled with messages like FREE THE THREE or GIVE THE RIGHT A CHANCE or DON'T BUY FOREIGN, some of them evincing not only rhetoric but a certain fusion of poetry and appeal. PRAY FOR THE TIMES. But Mary, it must be clearly understood, reads none of this; is as impermeable to rhetoric as only a woman of her age and means can be. She is no longer interested in Messages. She has not believed for a long time that the Answer lies anywhere outside of her skull. She still, however, does believe in the Answer. We shall see evidence of this now and again.

The near corner is, of course, that against which her bed is placed and it is for this reason that the bags are there; it enables her to collapse for a rest immediately upon dropping the bags in her wake and, conversely, she is then able to go through their considerable contents later and at some leisure without ever leaving her bed. Despite the fact that she is in relatively good physical

condition, this is an advantage not to be disregarded, although the contents of the bags themselves are often disappointing. Mary is seventy-eight years old.

She has been a collector of used merchandise now for some ten years or shortly after she hit the six-four double for three thousand five hundred eighty nine dollars and forty cents at Belmont on a cheerless fall afternoon. Feeling that the end of her horseplaying career was now imminent, she looked for another activity which would divert her in her old age. Unfortunately, she lost almost all of the proceeds within six months, largely on hot tips and new tipsheets, and thus the bags, instead of being her main occupation became only a sideline, a satellite as it were to the business at hand. But the mechanics of collecting kind of interest her, even now. She knows that some day she will hit a large double again and this second time around she will not be so foolish; she will invest half the winnings in reliable stocks. Once she found a current *Telegraph* folded neatly in a collection of orange peels, smelling vaguely of lint. In terms of collections, this has been her Main Hit, although there have been a couple of lunches.

On the other, more important side of the room, lie the tipsheets. Mary has the most impressive collection of used tipsheets in the city of New York. It is possible that it is the only such collection (I have not researched this) since, unlike the *Morning Telegraph*, tipsheets are not meant to remain on file. Bought for the instant at the track and used only for an afternoon, they tend to be an ugly reminder of losses or dependence, and horseplayers discard them somewhere underfoot or in the lavatories shortly before the last race. All of them, that is, except Mary who has been saving tipsheets since she first went to the track, some fifty years ago. They lie in even, multicolored stacks on the far wall: the *Lawtons* in an orange pile, the *Rowes* in a yellow, the *Powells* in a green, the

New York Turf Letters in a blue and white, and so on. In composite, and there are several hundred thousand of them there, they compose a living anthology of defeat—or perhaps it is victory depending upon the luck of the tipsheets and the faith of those interpreting them. One of the piles contains what Mary feels to be the prize of her collection: the only twenty issues ever published of the *International Astrological Predictor* which, attuned to the various zodiacal signs, attempted to give each horse-player an individual reading. The trouble with the *Predictor*, as Mary understands it, is that it often gave twelve horses in a race.

(It is understood that the use these people make of "astrology" is megalomaniacal and insane. They feel, some of them, that the "heavens" somehow gave them a "sign" for their "destiny" if not convenience, and this is worth an ironic essay of some length and judicious weight. Unfortunately I do not have the time now, but it should have been pointed out to them a long time ago that inasmuch as some "planets" are "inhabited" and the zodiacal signs for the tenants of these planets would be in contradiction to their own, what can be made of all this? Multiple destiny? Law of entropy? Gains and losses? This is only part of the ambivalence of the construct. It is a pity that I will not be able to go into this in sufficient detail.)

Mary did not buy all of these tipsheets, of course. Their gross value, purchased, would be upwards of $75,000. (It is important to be precise; it sculptures out a kind of balance in the madness.) Mary has never had this kind of money, even during winning streaks. She buys only *Lawton*, following the Orange Madman's prophecy with a kind of dazzled compulsiveness which would be founded upon design if there were any kind of consistency to it. The others she has collected on her own, either from the pavements of the track, or by begging

them from horseplayers as, tipsheets under arm, they prepare to leave the scenes of their demolition. "Pardon me sir but may I please have that *New York Turf Letter* you're holding? I want to compare selections and surely you'd bless an old lady, won't you?" This is Mary's standard line and has met with unified success.

But occasionally a stubborn or lunatic horseplayer has actually withheld the goods, depositing on Mary a slow burning glare of knowledge and saying something like, "Huh, you old bitch, you just want to pick up the systems without laying out the cash, right?" It is at times like these that Mary's truest and most subtle diplomacy has come to the fore. "Oh no sir," she says, "I just want to mail it to my son who is overseas now in the army and used to love to play the horses; it gives him a feeling that he's got a part of home with him if he only has his *New York Turf Letter* that he loved so, or do you think that he loves fighting the war for you?" And this has never failed to work, not even once, since the only thing more characteristic of horseplayers than desperation is their guilt. (If they lose, they are being punished, if they win the money is not really theirs.) Every one of them—I have done a little survey detail—believes that he would be best and truest to himself in a state of terminal diagnosis or mortal combat. "Oh sure, lady, for your son in the war," even the most maddened of those petitioned will say, and Mary has another *Turf Letter* to add to her collection. Or *Top Turf*. Of those two she finds the *Turf Letter* more sensible although *Top Turf* is not afraid, every other race or so, to give a real longshot just to show that it has courage and imagination. Perhaps the proprietor of *Top Turf* has a somewhat larger mind than the rest of them.

One begins to wonder: exactly who *are* the people behind the tipsheets? Are they businessmen cynically manipulating the drives of horseplayers to their own mild

profit or, as it increasingly seems more likely to me, are they horseplayers themselves—horseplayers into losing streaks so long and cruel that they have been forced to sell their intimations rather than follow them? For the same reason that most bartenders in working-class bars appear to be alcoholics or barely reformed alcoholics, I think that the latter suggestion is probably the more viable.)

It is hard to say exactly what Mary has in mind for the tipsheets, once she has acquired them. She collects them for a certainty and enjoys looking at them in the aggregate as her first act on awakening. On sunny mornings in the summer there is a virtual blaze of color and cheer vaulting from the side of the room toward her bed, catching the beam of daylight through the window and sending it to Mary in clouds of orange and green which makes her feel as if she were celebrating the force of nature itself. But witness is not the sum of her activity; she spends long mumbling hours, two or three evenings a week, during which she crouches by the sheets and runs her hands through their weary selections cackling to herself. Now and then she is apt to pull a tipsheet at random from the stack and point a finger at something she sees.

"You look here!" she will say to the ceiling, "on November 5, 1958, Lawton picked Egg Nog to place in the third race at Jamaica, and I remember that race as distinctly as the day I was born. That horse finished *fifth.* Went lame, the son of a bitch. This *proves* that they don't know what they're talking about! Not one of those sons of bitches has any sense at all!" she will say and put the tipsheet back into its proper place with a flourish, thereby ending the discussion.

"Ah, the stupid bastards," she will say, "they don't know what in hell they are doing, not a single one of them and that's the whole trouble. The thing is in the

hands of idiots, just like this jerk Powell here who always goes to maidens in mixed claimers because they get light weight and he feels they can't lose—but what Rowe does to a maiden claimer, shouldn't be done to a dog."

God, the actual degree of heat in Mary's apartment: it is late spring and what with the steady deterioration of the climate through the last half-century on this planet due mostly to radioactives and the effects of the post-industrial period, it is almost unbearable here, even for Mary, let alone the man who is at present occupying the space with her and, so to speak, making things even hotter. This man is short and fat and can be most conveniently located somewhere in his late forties. He is Mary's only son, a stockbroker named Julian, and he is at the moment attempting to complete a dialogue with Mary which has gone on for several hours now, has become increasingly painful, and has, several times forced my own intervention into Mary's brain in order to protect her against the chance of cerebral seizure.

"I won't go," she is saying, "and that's final. I won't have any part of it. I'm an independent woman and I live my own life and can live it until I die which will not be soon, thank you. You'd take me away from all this?" and motions toward the stacks of tipsheets on the left, the bags on the right, consecutive gestures which seem to make Julian (he prefers, in his trade, to be called Jules but reverts to a kind of stammering Julianship with his mother; somehow things never work out with her as they should) stagger in the foul, shifting breezes of the room and then clutch something in the vicinity of his chest. He feels that his physical self is deteriorating but his mother has always done this to him.

"Never," she says. "Oh no. Never, never, never, never!"

"You have to, Mother," Julian says with what he takes to be filial discipline. "You can't live here anymore. The

whole section is coming down for urban renewal, anyway."

"Ha!" Mary said. "They'll have to carry us out dead. We're suing. There's a tenant committee and everything. I'm a woman who knows her rights and they aren't going to renew me."

"And besides that," Julian says, "and let's be realistic about this now, I can't stand your losses anymore. I cannot finance this. I can help you with the rent and so on, but I can't back the horseracing. I mean, I've put up with it for a long, long time and I've been understanding and I know what it means to you and so on, but—"

"It's just a losing streak," Mary says. "Anyway, didn't I always steer you right? Just a little losing streak, nothing serious. Didn't I get you through college on my information? Wasn't it because of me that you had the clothes and car to get that bitch of a wife of yours? So I've had a tough time adjusting to the new surface, doesn't mean a thing." (The answer to all of Mary's questions is no. She is falsifying her past, but since she has been likewise falsifying the future for so long now, the discrimination is merely a nicety. She dismisses it. It is beneath her.)

"I don't care, Mother," Julian says, resisting at cost (I am omnipotent in these circumstances, as you know, and can deduce not only motive but ambivalence) an impulse to sob. "I don't care whether it's a little losing streak or a long one. I can't argue anymore. I just can't *afford* it. We have to get you into—uh—well, we have to get you into a more controlled environment. Somewhere where you'll be protected and taken care of and—"

"No," Mary says with a pleasing finality. In profile, her face seems to Julian to be that of a woman years younger, perhaps a woman transmuted by rage and suffering into some earlier and better vestige of herself. "I won't have anything to do with it, Julian. I'll never go

to a nursing home and I'll never stop playing the horses. I'm in a little trouble right now but nothing serious and I'll get right out of it. It's my entitlement. I devoted my whole life to working out the system and just when I'm finally on the point of seeing a little return from all my interest, just when I'm about able to enjoy my old age, you come—*you* who I put through college and got that bitch of a wife for—and tell me that you're going to take it all away from the old woman. I won't have it. I worked too hard. I deserve my pleasure, it's the only thing we got."

As she says the last of this, with a pleasing dramatic flourish and an absence of self-pity which even I can find commendable, Mary stumbles back from Julian, overbalances, and without dignity or ceremony, topples heavily to the floor, her passage somewhat deflected by the bags which give her a nasty thump in the back and then deposit her, on her knees from which she regards Julian with a faint and uncustomary glare of appeal. Trembling, he reaches forward to bring her to her feet. (This is not the first time that Mary has fallen in this way, although she rather too often has a habit of doing it before relatives and acquaintances during a period of intense argument. As he does so, as he feels the pressure of his fluttering old Mom moving within his cupped palms, what is left of Julian's reserve, not to say his exterior, crumbles. He feels totally out of control and does not know if it is rage or fear which drives him to say what he then says, holding onto her tightly.

"I won't have it!" he shouts, giving Mary's lines back to her with a considerably different reading, "I tell you, I won't have this anymore; I can't stand it. I won't be associated with you! I'll pay for the room and I'll pay for the food, all right and I'll give you an allowance even—but I won't, I absolutely won't, I absolutely refuse to give you any money for the horses now. It's not fair! It's not right!

I have no interest in horses! They don't mean a thing to me! All my life I somehow managed to avoid them, it isn't reasonable that *I* should be a loser." He backs away from her, and when his pelvis bumps against the wall, he feels a certain grinding presence and manages, not unhappily, to bring himself back to a true confrontation of the circumstances: his mother's age, the condition of the room, the flies which whir absently, suspended in the gelatinous air, the snap of horns outside, the cries of children pelting the window. It is really insane. Even in a calamitous market he still holds down a desk at Hochstein & Super, and lunch hour, even the lunch hour of a broker, is now ending.

"No more time," he says. "Now you make the decision: either you go to a nursing home or you stop playing the horses but you can't do this to me!" Julian moans and with this arietta seems to spin slowly through time itself, moving flylike toward the door. When he gets there, he looks at his mother for a moment until her gaze rises to his and then he leaves the room, slamming the door firmly. It seems that he has said all that he is going to say.

This has been Julian's fifth visit to his mother during the past six months, all of these visits having had the same subjectual basis but never before has he spoken with such commendable passion, forthrightness, lack of ambiguity. It is something which I, steeped as I am in the deadly circumlocutions of language not to say implication, can appreciate, and I savor it sidewise while with a thin harumph I clear my throat to reconstitute my dialogue with Mary.

Mary and I are on excellent speaking terms. Of all of them, she has been the quickest to accept me; the friendliest, the least reserved, the most reasonable. She has managed to accept both my existence and her sanity, a speculative vault which would be surprising under the

circumstances if it were not so very moving. She trusts me. Mary, for all the bad press which she has received, has an open mind and a communicative intelligence, and one would wish that these qualities were not trapped into a corpus as luckless, superstitious, and panicky as hers often tends to be. On the other hand, she was picked at random, so I have no complaints.

"The son of a bitch," Mary says, sitting on the floor again but with a certain poised dignity and grace which would surprise the puffing Julian who I happen to know is now hurtling through the stones and garbage of the Upper West Side, looking frantically for a taxicab, blinking his eyes against tears and smog. Never, he has resolved, will he have dealings with his mother again. He will not sustain her horseplaying anymore. What terrorizes Julian and adds no small impetus to his flight is this: he realizes that he still believes that his mother is somehow the precursor of Information and that lurking behind her whines, sobs, accusations, and wrath is always the possibility of the Ultimate Tip of such dimension as to whirl him free past stockbrokership (to say nothing of his wife) and to some uncharted vintage of possibility where he will be able, in peace, to wangle alternatives forever. Julian hails a cab. He stumbles into it gasping and leaves the Upper West Side forever. Two days later he will have a coronary which will hospitalize him for six months and leave him thereafter a bloated, pallid, wreck, only barely cognizant, through shifting eyes, of what has been done to him. Three years from today he will die gracelessly at noon. I am sorry. I am sorry about this, Julian. Nevertheless, there is really nothing I can do about it; I am not your tenant and you are not a horseplayer. Enough. Enough of trajectories.

"The son of a bitch ain't got no perspective," Mary says, "no damned perspective." She gasps a little, prowls through the tipsheets, removes a 1957 *Powell*. The bas-

tard went off Gallant Man in the Belmont," she says. "Look, it's right here. It was there staring him in the face how that horse couldn't lose and he went to Bold Ruler. What the hell are you going to do when idiots like this are on top?" Her eyes dazzle; this has been a comfort line and yet, somehow, she is not yet eased. "Ah the bastard, the dirty bastard," she mumbles and crawls over to the nearest of the bags, extracts half of a salami sandwich carefully stowed a few days earlier against this kind of crisis and begins to eat sullenly. "He doesn't care what comes of me and after I got him that wife, too." A certain plaintive note extrudes which I cannot miss and which gives me, to the extent that I can feel emotion at all, a start of genuine satisfaction.

"It isn't fair," she yells. Mary does not subvocalize like some of the others; if worth saying, she feels, it is worth screaming. "It just isn't right. And after I spent all those years working on the system and just beginning to get it nice and tight, just began to work in the factor for maidens and the odds angle, after all of this the son of a bitch does this to me. Well, I shouldn't call him a son of a bitch. Well, yes, I *can* call him a son of a bitch. I guess it doesn't matter one way or the other." She chokes down the remainder of the sandwich with difficulty. "Ah, Christ, they're all out to get you anyway."

"Listen Mary," I intervene. It is important that I seize this moment to make my points as efficaciously as possible and yet, confronted by this opportunity I have a feeling of what could be termed inadequacy which makes me stumble just a trifle for words. Perhaps it is the very imminence of a qualified success which blocks me, or perhaps it is merely that congenital streak of incompetence which was responsible for my decision to join the Bureau in the beginning (civil service, even at the highest levels, is security rather than achievement oriented). "Listen, Mary, you can see the whole thing

happening, you know what I mean? I mean if the kid pulls out the support then you won't be able to stand the losses anymore and the whole thing is going to go down the drain, of course it wouldn't go that way if you started to win, but the system doesn't look very good. Let's face it Mary old girl," (a certain leisurely informality can be assumed to work itself into many of my dialogues; one cannot stand on ceremony with these creatures because the only rituals which are meaningful to them are self-imposed), "it's right down the drain now and downhill all the way. No way out, just the nursing home and rockers at three instead of the fourth race; a little bowl of soup at five instead of the ninth, lights out at nine instead of studying the *Telegraph*. See it straight, Mary, there's only one way to go and it's the big bad way—but there is an escape, one escape that will solve everything if you do it now. But you can't wait, Mary, you can't fake it. You've got to seize the moment or should I say the time and follow through."

"What?" she says, ingesting the sandwich and taking another half from the bag. She is completely fixated on me, thrilled, as it were, into a kind of heightened consciousness, perhaps by the intensity of my appeal (I have heretofore been reasonable with her and attempted to do by rational means what is seemingly impossible through the melodramatic), perhaps by the intensity of her plight. She has always accepted me but it is now as if I, along with the sandwich, am suffering the excursion of ingestion. There is some greed to her intensity as she says again, "What do I do? What's the answer? Tell me? Because I don't think that anybody knows, that's what I'm beginning to learn. Not a one of them."

"It's obvious, Mary," I say with a pedantic gentleness and render upon her trembling, gray little psyche a pat almost affectionate in its tingling connection, it not only quiets her but brings certain centers of the brain into a

howling awareness. "You've still got a little bit left. Not enough to carry you at all but something you managed to squeeze away out of the budget and even away from the horses. You still have it, don't you, Mary? Five hundred dollars, right between pages 102 and 104 of the *Monthly Chart Book* for December of 1972 which is under your bed."

"How'd you know that?" she says. "I mean, how could you tell? There's no one—"

"Isn't it obvious, Mary?" I say. "Isn't it obvious to you how I knew? Come on, be realistic now. There's very little time left. You can see it all before you, can't you?"

She thinks about this for a while, the planes of her simple, weary, honest old face seeming to muddle together in some anguish of heat and light, and then she says, "Of course. Of course I had to understand. It had to be that way, didn't it?"

"The answer, Mary. There's only one answer, you know. Unless you want all of it to go away and then all you will know will be light: light coming in through the windows of the nursing home, light from the examining tools of dishonest young physicians who, for a small retainer will pronounce you dead or alive depending upon the vigorish in the book; light from the trays of food winking in the corridors, light from the stethoscopes gleaming like an inquiry sign as the solemn, serious, blunt young face of an orderly turns downward toward you and—"

"The answer," she says. "Just give me the answer." It would seem that I have had some effect upon her. Painful this but necessary. I do not like to hit them so hard—they are, for all their degeneracy, so infuriatingly vulnerable—but this is the only way that they can be encouraged to listen. "Just tell me the answer. Come on."

"Don't you know it, Mary? Haven't you followed it in the alleys of your mind night after night dwindling into

sleep, the slow extinguishment of consciousness leading you toward that epiphany, that sense of connection which came out of necessity and told you that this was what you had to do? Haven't you dreamed it Mary; touched the torch a thousand times."

"Ah, don't give me none of that bullshit. I can't pay no attention. Just tell me what I should do, will you?"

"You tell me, Mary."

We confront one another then in an endless, unchanging silence for a period of time which could be seconds or several years (depending upon one's planet of origin, its cycle of revolution, the nature of its ecology) and then she says, "What you mean then is that I got to take the whole five hundred—"

"The whole five hundred, Mary. Every cent of it is right."

"And I've got to take it to the track."

"That's right, Mary. You've got to take it to the track."

"The whole five hundred. You want me to take every cent of it?"

"That's right, Mary. You can't leave any of it out, now. It has to be everything because that's the only fairness."

"And I have to put that whole five hundred—"

"You can't hold back. It has to be one shot and out because that's the way that you always wanted it, isn't it?"

"The five hundred?"

"Come on, Mary. You're almost there now. Just a little bit more, now. You have to take the five hundred and lay it—"

"Lay it on a selection and hope that it comes in," she says and leans against the wall gasping hoarsely, wiping an arm against her forehead, overcome, one might think, from the speculative vault except that I know Mary too well and that it is only a certain pathos which is inspiring her. She sees herself at this moment as a small woman against Doom and if there is little ennoblement

in it, then the background must be seen. "Lay it all on a selection and hope it comes in." She croaks, and her eyes flutter. She feels overcome by fatigue. She shifts on the floor, adjusting her limbs. "Hope it comes in," she says, "and all comes in for the selection that's out, and then everything is in and out, out to the inness, shade to the darkness, dark to the light." Her breathing becomes slightly more regular and she seems to subside against the wall in a long, rolling slant which carries her, in stages, to the floor.

A cheek nestles against one of her bags, an orange peel coming to fall atop her forehead and giving her the aspect of a still life: Woman with Fruit at Night. It is a touching and affecting scene rendering her a grandeur and grace which even the doomed Julian might appreciate. Prayers come by bets; they come in oranges as well. "Hope it comes in," Mary murmurs to the orange and falls into a deep sleep so deep and true that I can barely encompass it (being sentenced merely to sentience and disaster a thousand light-years from her); a spiralling circular sleep for Mary at the end of which it can be assumed that Judgment resides.

Or is it a horse? Yes, it is a horse, the three horse. The three horse is coming on the outside, now, moving fastest of all at the finish, hooking the field, the jockey rolling on the flanks like a puppet, and as the field comes by Mary's point of view, the three has hooked it. It has come head to head with the leader and now it is passing; the three is winning. The three is winning, the three is winning, the dim shriek of the crowd rises toward lustful knowledge as the field stumbles and staggers, flutters and leaps toward the wire. And at the wire there is a sound: shatter of cannon bone, twist of foreleg, cry of horse and bleat of jockey and somewhere between Mary's point of view and the clubhouse a horse has gone down. It is impossible to see from this angle the number on the saddle-

cloth but the horse is thrashing in agony and as the field comes by slowly and grandly, rearing to reverse, jockeys swaying to an upright position to bring them into assembly on the backstretch, as the rites of the race move toward conclusion, Mary waits in a poised and terrible uncertainty, looking at the board, waiting for the number of the winner to go up. The judges, it seems, have called for a photograph to determine the order of finish. All tickets are to be held until the result of the race is official. In the next race there are no changes. In the seventh race there is a change of jockeys. In the eighth race the five horse is wearing mud caulks. All tickets to be held please. Do not discard your pari-mutuel tickets until the result of the race is official. Mary rams herself against the rail like an insect, she is trying to tear the information from the board but the board is blank. Everything is blank.

Mary slowly falls open-mouthed away from the bags and into a protective ball against the floor. She snores. Mary is now sleeping. Witness her sleep. True and central, deep and final, she plunges toward that fire as her son eats a sandwich at Hochstein and all of Manhattan curls into the sea.

CHAPTER IV

Second Recitatif: Most of the racetracks are built between ten and twenty miles from the center of large urban areas. In the less populated areas of the country, of course, they tend to be somewhat closer than that to the main belt, but as a general indice, it is safe to say that the racetracks are conterminous to but wholly without the central cities of their country. There are two reasons for this.

One is the question of real estate values. The average racetrack covers several hundred acres and property and land values in the city are such that the racing associations simply could not afford to have their enterprise directly in the metropolitan areas. (It is remarkable how easily I have assimilated their filthy jargon, with what swooning facility I can regurgitate this rhetoric. It hypnotizes to think of what they have done with language for now, it virtually obliterates all meaning. Nevertheless, one must go on. There is so little time. The circumstances are so foul. The aura of these people is so disgusting. But a certain tacitness extrudes, a limited sense of delicacy. They sweat. They confuse mortification with corruption.

The other reason is co-equal and possibly the more significant in the long run. It is the question of displace-

ment. The race tracks must be away from the center of the metropolitan areas because they represent—at least, to those who patronize them—the excision of all those values on which the metropolitan areas are themselves based: rationality, causality, consequence, effort, consumption, production, accretion, etc. The racetracks are founded upon something different; they are selling (and selling well) the conception that there is no simple way out, that causality is meaningless, that accretion has to do only with psychic conditions and not with possessions (which must be metaphors for true gain) and if they are too close to the metropolitan areas, the message might move uncomfortably near to a larger heterogeneity of the population. They represent an alternative. And the alternative is one of annihilation, devastation, and waste.

Annihilation! Devastation! Waste! Or: waste! annihilation! devastation! However you want it, you can score this gloomy triad for chamber orchestra (I think of a flute concerto backed by double bass and a simple string continuo). It could be the basis for a massive contrapuntal chant; one could, with the more likelihood, install these words on placards in every place of public assembly within these aforementioned metropolitan areas, undoubtedly to stunning effect. Seeing for the first time the true sum of their lives humbly inscribed in florid script before them, would the mortgagees and tenants be driven toward a kind of insight? Who knows? Is it not worth a try?

Perhaps I ramble. Looking back on these notes to date —hasty, wandering, faulty in their apprehension of the truly fascinating individuals with whom I have come to deal—I see that to a certain extent I have already defied my purposes which were not so much circumlocution as the act of explication. I wanted to make it clear what is going on here. I wanted it to be understood, and under-

stood well, that what is going to happen would happen anyway; all that I am providing is a shade of haste and manipulation. I wanted to make it clear how they deserved what they were going to get. Yet I have not quite succeeded.

To the contrary, skimming rapidly, I see dialogues, retrospection, institutions bargained with and unyielding, complaints and so on. A certain characterological sense seems to be lacking. My own motives, shining and bureaucratically pure as they may be, seem shrouded in mystery, my eventual purposes highly qualified. I did not want this. I wanted to, as they say, "go with the chalk." Yet this is so intolerably difficult.

A lesson can be drawn from Simmons. Simmons has (who would have guessed it?) something to teach me. His exercises in self-justification are purely external and for himself. Having settled his scores he finds no need to break into new ground; he can settle them over and again, each thread a shining element in the tangle. What he lacks in gesture he provides in flourish. Nevertheless, I cannot take the course of a Simmons. I come from different stock. Other formative experiences and so on. Also my range is somewhat wider."

One senses the slow convulsion, the slow turning here toward absolute disengagement and confrontation. One can feel the disaster palpable in the very air: the salt marshes surrounding the racetrack stink with an awful poignance which on certain cloudy Tuesdays and Thursdays penetrates the infield itself, wraps all of its occupants into a spirit of mortality, and whisks them with dispatch to grandstand and mutuel machine where, in some slender compensation, they proceed to place the remaining parts of themselves on the line. The smell, composed of urban decay, ozone, and something even more profound which might be the signal of ecological

rebellion, fills even the insensitive horseplayers with grief and nostalgia. They seem to smell their history. Speechless, it can address them only through the nostrils.

Meanwhile, the swans who paddle the infield lake here tell no secrets whatsoever, preferring to concentrate upon a small enclosure within the reeds. Perhaps they are copulating, working on the next generation of swans to inhabit the lake in, say, 1988. What mindless certainty! But they are only swans; they do not understand that the racing association in its wisdom and efficiency imports a new crop every so often, returning the corpses of previous tenants (too much pollution) to some version of the Swan's Motel. One wants to think of a bevy of late Aqueduct swans, laid neatly in the reception room of some hideous rest stop, sheltered in glass coffins over which are neatly arrayed wreaths made out of mutuel tickets. But somehow the metaphor involves too much struggle.

I do not sentimentalize the swans! One must learn to oversentimentalize nothing. Time and again I have had to counteract this tendency, remind myself (as Simmons does often enough but he in the matter of prostitutes) that it is needless, destructive, and deadly, to sentimentalize that which has no feeling for you. I am not to be blamed for the individual fates of swans, let alone horseplayers and horsemen who are, as they should know, acting as mere correlatives for the overall condition. Certain folklore in their history and ours holds that a given number of individuals are the repositories and focus of all guilt and suffering for the unburdened millions who live in their times, and if that group happens here to be horseplayers, how can I be blamed? I did not crawl into their beds years ago and whisper talk of hits. I did not create the circumstances that sent them here. I came onto the scene long after they had completed their undeviating journey: rip of ticket, flicker of tote, scream of

dismay, bellow of rage, whisk of horses, tap of jockey, speckles of mud on their feet as they patter to the windows. This was the situation I was given, not created.

Nevertheless. Nevertheless: why do I feel *culpable*?

CHAPTER V

Simmons is now tapped out. He sits on his sofa and for the first time regards his notebook. The statistics are so clear that he can barely come to terms with them. But the truth can no longer be escaped: he has no money left. Or, he has fifteen dollars left. In either event, he has no means to pay the rent which is already due. He is unable to repair his shoes. The cry of an illegitimate baby down the hall reminds him that he has no means of a sustenance. A scatter of roaches across the floor reminds him that he has few visible means of sanitation and that his wardrobe has expired. The hoots of children on the street below remind him that he has cast his seed upon the ground. The baby sputters. The roaches dart. The children throw or seem to throw a ball which clatters ominously against his windowpane and then, dislodging one of the landlady's flowerpots, falls to the street with an augmented crash. Toilets flush down the hall. The sound of a broom in the corridors. Simmons sighs and opens the new morning *Telegraph* which, with a doughnut, he has just picked up for dinner. He opens to the entries for the first race, shakes his head, mutters something, shakes it again, and warily puts his index finger on the page, runs it down loosely. Figures seem to dazzle his eyes, past performance workouts flow dimly against

the seat of his consciousness. He pauses to look at the form for Never Far Back, an aged gelding who has been running in bad form recently but who, Simmons noted the last time (he bet him and the horse finished seventh) has now had his appearance improved through the colorful addition of pastel foreleg bandages which quite glisten and catch the sun as the horse stumbles lamely through the stretch. Appearances are vital.

"There's got to be a spot," Simmons says and shakes his head. "There's just got to be a *spot*."

"Simmons," I say, "Simmons, if you'll just listen to me a—"

"Shut up you evil, foul-minded son of a bitch," Simmons says.

CHAPTER VI

Despite my good efforts, Mary awakens blinking to a stab of urgency and phones the turf information service for the *Clocker-Eye Racing Notebook*. The service offers the results of each and every race at the New York tracks about forty-five minutes after last post, thereby enabling its readers and followers to avoid the agony of waiting for the morning papers somewhat later on with a handful of bookie slips or advance tickets clumped against the change in their pockets, slowly turning to glue under the pressure of anxiety. The service of the *Racing Notebook* (one deftly drops jargon in referring to it from now on; it is my analysis that the more mystical the pursuit the more heavy-handed the titles, we can safely ignore this) is the uniquely valuable dedication to improving not only the breed of horses but horseplayers. The only problem is that in order to circumvent federal and state laws the *Eye* Mouth would be more appropriate) cannot give out the results by names of horses. Instead, they are forced to do so by number; the numbers being the order of selection made by the Eye itself in its issue for the day. That is to say that if the Eye's third choice in a given race won, its seventh choice finished second and its eleventh finished third, the efficient but nervous secretary who takes these calls will announce the results as

three-seven-eleven, necessitating that users of the service must have a copy of the Eye before them in order to make sense of the results.

(Nonusers are, however, entitled to take their chances. The Eye has been deep in a losing streak for many years now and a disproportionate number of winners turn out to have numbers like twelve and eight and six; that the Eye should so publicly reveal its incompetence is something that Mary would find difficult and puzzling if she had not come to understand herself a while back that the seventy-five cents invested in each issue of the Eye can be said to cover not so much information as the result service. In fact, the man who makes the selections for the Eye is the publisher himself, an eighty-three-year-old man with a lisp and stammer who, some years ago, lost his entire sex book factory during a disastrous week in Saratoga and was forced to find some useful way to get back at the system. He has, in certain senses then, been getting even ever since, but he has picked the wrong set of victims. His predilection for selecting horses moving up sharply in class after a disastrous race is well known and celebrated in the trade, and the fact that this did produce a $116.20 winner some seven years ago is still accounting for a full ten percent of the tiny circulation of the Eye. Mary calls it the *Evil Eye* but for all her shrewdness she is rather simpleminded and certainly gullible.)

It is that tipsheet which Mary now holds before her as she dials the requisite number and asks for the winner of the ninth race at Aqueduct held some ninety minutes ago. Through a friend who goes to the track every day (Mary only goes four or five times a week) she has placed a two dollar bet on a longshot, Mr. Mal, who, she figured could not possibly be lower than 40-1 and was a sure thing to finish at the very least sixth in its large field.

"Ninth race," a querulous male voice says over the

phone (perhaps the publisher himself, in order to save on overhead, is now taking the calls), "ninth race at Aqueduct, June 6, 1978. Winner is number ten. Second number three. Third horse number five. Buy the *Clocker-Eye Racing Notebook* at selected newsstands or at the grandstand entrance to the racetrack. Thank you for your interest," and hangs up with a clatter. Mary opens the *Eye* to the inmost page and finds that the tenth selection was a colt named Northway, listed in the morning line as 6-5. Her own selection, she finds grimly, was that of the *Eye* itself and can be presumed then to have been out of the money. She throws the *Eye* away in a kind of fury, removes a large notebook from one of the bags and makes an entry. According to her calculations, she is already seventy-three dollars behind for the week.

"It's only a little losing streak, the system is sound," she mumbles. Finding no comfort in this she adds, "Lawton picked the bastard as a longshot special only four races ago, damn it. Sons of bitches, it's all rigged. *All rigged.*" And then she does something very unMarylike, something so much out of the pattern of her previous behavior as to disconcert even me: she folds her arms tightly across her cheekbones and begins to cry. It is a high, falsetto wail, not totally unpleasing in the aesthetic sense and even rather soothing and I listen to it for a few moments, amazed as always by the capacity of these people to move me.

Finally I intervene. It is not, after all, my intention to prolong their suffering; as a matter of clear evidence I am doing everything within my power to end it. "You see, Mary," I say gently, "it can't possibly work. It just won't work that way at all. Even if the horse had won, you only would have made eighty dollars. You're in too deep. You've got to bail yourself out of this the only way you can."

"I know, I know," she says and her voice comes out

clear and strident against the sobs, a kind of double-stopping of vocal effects showing real virtuosity, "I know that, but who would have ever known, when I got started, that there would be so much pain in it? You know? You know what I'm saying? Who would have thought that it would come to—"

"It would have to, Mary. The whole game sits on disaster. The disaster inflames it, informs it, gives it color and credence. You knew. You knew that from the first day."

"I want to go back to sleep," she says. "I didn't want I should have gotten up in the first place to find out how the race went. I wish I was still sleeping. I'm going back to sleep."

She folds herself on the floor, sighs, scrapples her feet into the wood and, using a bag as a pillow, begins to snore again.

It is a most convincing picture of human degradation. Except—and how can I sufficiently emphasize this point —except that Mary is not genuinely degraded, not in any sense that I have come to understand this word. Rather, she is apotheosized. Looking at her from this angle, my own sensibilities somewhat blurred by the grit in this room, it is as if I see not the common Mary to whom I have adjusted over this period, not the common Mary at all but instead a Mary Transfigured, one elevated by her passion to an assumption so vast and impermeable that nothing can really touch her.

If it is the horses which have brought her such comfort, say I, then may they run faster and forever. And if, like all qualities, they seek not only Transfiguration but Declension; if it is true that the obverse of every quality is that which would destroy it . . . Then seeing all of this (and how peculiarly they live what with dreadful counteracting tones of guilt, as if they do not desire their own mortality) one still wants the horses to run: moving with

grace through the banked surfaces of the track, skittering down the backstretch like birds caught in the Hunter's Eye, vaulting into the homestretch with the heaving ecstasy and sense of connection which these humans themselves can only know in that most banal and struggling act which they think of as love. For love, for Love!

Mary dreams. In her dreams now she is winning forever. I gather myself into her and we make the passage together, toward that track without a tote, where all bets are prayers and the distant backstretch becomes another alleyway of the unspeakable human heart.

CHAPTER VII

Consider now, Tony. (He will procure the materials.) Tony is the problem. My communications with Tony, minimal from the first, have become bankrupt. It is as if there is a wall firmly lodged between his reason and myself; behind that wall Reason vainly kicks and scuttles, looking for a chink that would mean an arc of connection. But Tony's wall is firm, composed of forty years of rage, humiliation, defeat, disgust, etc., and it is not about to be kicked over by such feeble dwarves as compose his imperfectly contained sense of reason. Over this wall Reason and I are able to exchange confidences, perjoratives, and prayers, all held against that time (we do believe it) when the wall will collapse and we will conjoin, but for the time being it holds and there is little we can do other than to cheer one another. His reason, which I have said to be composed of dwarves is not to be underestimated: misshapen they may be but a certain piercing quality to their little eyes and lower features indicates that underneath it all the dwarves would be estimable people if only given the opportunity.

"Don't take this guy as permanent; he's a rest stop," Reason has consoled me, and I have, after a fashion, agreed, although it is perfectly clear to me that Tony and his reason are linked together as only suffering bedmates

might be. Left to its own devices, Tony's reason would be in severe trouble: where would it find the ironies to feed it? The conjunctions? The endless gap between ambition and fulfillment which is the very stuff of which the dwarves' suppers are made? (Of such questions we need make no more, although it is no small insight into my own nature to point out that it is questions like these which tantalize me the most and which seem central to my own existence. What means Reason? What value irony? What price conjoinment? How long a longshot? The conditions from which I come put high premium on this kind of metaphysic. Nevertheless, it is extraneous.)

It is Tony himself with whom we must deal: the stolid, obdurate, externalized Tony who, listed in the programs and entry sections of the *Telegraph* as Trainer: A. Miller operates a public stable in and out of the New York tracks.

The public trainer, of course, is one who accepts horses to train from owners of any stripe or persuasion, this being in contrast to the private trainer who works only with the horses of the one large operation which employs him. Practically speaking—and this is the only means for Trainer: A. Miller—this means that private trainers are able to cultivate, at least externally, a certain air of gentility, weary bohemianism, usually minor statesmanship, whereas public trainers, who come into a somewhat larger view of the world's maddening heterogeneity, get all the nuts. To A. Miller come people like the doughnut manufacturer in Queens who owns three or four dismal thirty-five hundred dollar claimers and does not understand why his colors of cinnamon and sugar consistently fail to come in front of the fields. To A. Miller come failed mobsters with a vague desire to claim or run a couple of horses but lack connections. To A. Miller come old ladies from Mamaroneck who would emulate the popular admired Patrice Jacobs but instead come off

as more reminiscent of Cowbell Hilda. The ladies are not the least of Tony's problems—he has a certain freedom of language which is not to be indulged in front of them, but there is simply no way in which he can otherwise express satisfactorily what he thinks of them and their miserable horses. However, it is not the ladies who at this time are imposing upon his time and talent.

Rather, all of Tony's energies, such are they, are presently fixated upon a small horse which is standing nakedly in the paddock area at Aqueduct, a number three thrown over its back. Blinkers are now being adjusted by one of Tony's grooms, a thin, whining boy with pimples who came to work for Tony some months ago because he believed that "tips" would augment his salary and expenses but who has only succeeded in losing all of his salary plus a bit of his resources. (This makes the groom somewhat bitter but we can happily pass him by. His possibilities are not linked in any significant way to horses, and in any event I find his mind dull and imperceptive. In a pinch he might show some ability with dynamite, but who needs him?) Tony is shaking his head with growing ferocity that is meant to signify despair, and as he backs off from the horse, hands on hips to regard it better, a certain shadow of genuine sorrow glazes over the face of A. Miller, giving it a rare (but moving) tragic overcast. He does not know what to make of this horse.

The horse, a four-year-old gelding named Make Peace, is one of Tony's own. The fact that the public trainer works with the horses of outsiders does not block him from trying to run a string of his own (this being the only sensible way out) and Make Peace is one of the three horses of twenty in Tony's care for which he possesses a trace of feeling. Most of the feeling is, naturally, not for the horse itself so much as for this extension of Tony, but this is not to be derided. In or out of the race-

track, one takes his feelings where he can, and Make Peace is one of the few elements in his life which can drive Tony into a genuine and urgent sense of connection with extra-Millerian matters. "Goddamn it," he says with growing wonder as he watches the horse now being led slowly into the walking ring by the disconsolate and cursing groom, "the son of a bitch is lame. He's lame, I can tell it from here. Who did this to me?"

Make Peace is not precisely lame; Tony knows this as well as I, and the horse would have been scratched by the stewards if its incapacity were as great as Tony would have it, but it is fair to say that for the last six months or so, he has performed as if he were. Tony who is, perhaps, somewhat more emotionally involved with his horses than the run of the mill public trainer has taken the horse's dismal performances to heart, as something of a personal comment (as it were) upon his training abilities and has been forced to rationalize the performances as being the willful efforts of a horse desirous of humiliating him. (This is a common frailty among these people; the buck is always passed. This is interesting and useful in the particular but tends to become something of a stricture when it invades their "international politics" or "urban renewal.") The horse, when he first came into Tony's care, was a $12,500 claiming animal capable of winning occasionally in races above that level and frequently in races below, thereby establishing his limits far better than Tony's ever could be (until recently). It was out of a $12,500 race that Tony claimed him at the behest of the prospective owner, an underwear manufacturer who had a couple of other, cheaper horses in Tony's care and wanted to go to the class. For the underwear manufacturer, the decision to claim an animal worth some eight thousand dollars more than any he had ever before owned might have been an existential leap of no small proportion, meaning that like many Americans

he was trying to move up and on through the categories. But although the manufacturer attempted to move up in class through this purchase, the horse had other ideas. Perhaps the horse, in painful, instinctive sympathy with the truest and darkest urges of his new owner, felt that a declension in class was immediately necessary so that he could meet his new owner, so to speak, halfway. It is this animaline perversity that killed the underwear manufacturer recently and allowed Tony to purchase the horse, cheap and less training expenses already incurred, from the estate. He had sentiment.

Make Peace has however gone above and beyond the call of overcompensation. He is now about to compete in a $3,500 claiming race, the lowest offered at Aqueduct, and, as Tony's one sullen glance at the tote board confirms for him, the horse is hardly the favorite even in these wretched circumstances. In fact, Make Peace is 40-1. This, in the sense that all tote board statements can be assumed to represent the ultimate truth less seventeen percent is a fair summation of the animal's standing and chances at the present time.

The career of Make Peace over these months has been true and unique, a subsumption of disaster so concrete and exquisitely enclosed as to move me into a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. In so many ways, the history of this horse seems to have paralleled my own progress: it is as if some mutual doppelganger inhabits Make Peace and myself, or perhaps we are only influencing one another without the necessity of common denominator. In either case, those facts about the horse's history which I have been able to infer from my acquaintance with Tony's unconscious mind, are fascinating and utterly moving. He has raced seven times in the color of the underwear manufacturer (green with white stripes, stars on the cap, bottles of liniment with crossed T's) and five in Tony's (black and white, red circles, bow and arrow in

the center, yellow checks) and has beaten a total of twelve horses in these twelve races which is to say that the average number of horses he has beaten at any given time is one point zero—in fields averaging ten or more. His most significant accomplishment during this period was a fourth (in a five horse field) on April 16th, when competing at six furlongs against $7,500 horses. Tony had advised the underwear manufacturer before the race that this looked like the proper spot, and the u.m., with several hundred relatives in tow, had appeared at the track precisely seven minutes before post to lay virtually all of the recent proceeds of activity on the horse. Leading to the eighth pole, Make Peace ceased entirely to lead thereafter, and Tony waited out the night in a grim, soaking sweat of anticipation: he wondered if the u.m. had contacts. The only contacts the u.m. had, however, were with the emergency room of a famous private hospital in which he died of cerebral exhaustion toward dawn.

(Another parenthetical notation is in order: Tony had known, toward the heart of it, that the $7,500 race was not the spot for the horse and that the animal, no less than his owner, was doomed. He had tipped the u.m. on the horse as a kind of subtle and refined aggression, this being the only way that Tony feels he can get back at the forces and maddened animals which contain his life and have done so very much to destroy it. Of course he conceals this knowledge from himself and attributes his false notification to irreducible optimism and pressures from owners, but he really knows what he is doing. There is so little time, so much mortality, so much of horses, so little of identity, poor Tony can only seem to break the cycle through misleading owners and it is a habit he will not break. It is to give no unusual knowledge to reveal that Tony no less than the late u.m. despises horses and wishes for their misfortune in a way

that could be entertained only by a man totally dependent upon them.)

Tony got the horse from the estate cheap and heard nothing further from the relatives. Perhaps they were glad to have the u.m. out of the way. He suspected that the u.m. had lost rather a lot (but does not know the half of it: the u.m. lost fifteen thousand now uncollectible dollars).

Since his latest dreadful performance Make Peace seems to have found his destiny. He will now follow horses in a straight line as quickly as possible, being careful not to break the intent of the formation but not following too far behind, either. Somewhere within the simple but crystalline depths of its mind, Make Peace has now reached an accommodation with racing: the idea is to be symmetical and not to give the other horses offense. There is no seeming way that Tony can break him of these habits nor is Tony, anymore convinced that he should try. There is something graceful, even touching, about Make Peace's latest habits and in the bargain the horse has no trace of viciousness: like many horses descended to the cheap races a certain humility seems to have overtaken him by the withers and moved gently to his neck and pointed ears. Make Peace seems to have become smaller, lighter, less present. He does not, in any event, want to make his presence very well known.

Tony examines the animal in the walking ring, his hands on his hips, puffing on a large cigar which he has somehow forgotten to ignite. Led more quickly now by the groom the horse seems to work out of some of its first stiffness and even whinnies a bit, a sign of factitiousness or perhaps mere anxiety to get to the starting gate and be done with it. The dull bay seems to compliment its background; it is a cloudy day with a dense, swaddling humidity and Make Peace fits into it well. Tony curses

and decides, not for the first time, that he made the wrong career choice and should have given himself a chance to finish high school before committing himself to a profession. Maybe he could have become a pharmacist and drugged horses on the sly.

The jockey, a small bitter man with compressed features, comes over to Tony, aimlessly swinging his whip and looking at the sky. Of French extraction, this jockey has been riding at the New York tracks for a couple of years now; he is not much of a jockey but then again there are very few trainers and agents who are unimpressed by a French accent and who, in the presence of this jockey, do not feel themselves to be of a somewhat higher, finer, more refined stock by virtue of giving information to a figure which interprets it with gallic nods and shrugs and will even mutter curses on request. Most of the participants in the mechanics of horseracing consider European racing and things European to be generally superior and it is largely for this reason that the jockey has had a kind of success. He cannot really ride very well, being cowardly and arrogant by turns, although some of the more ignorant horseplayers have come to think of him as a "longshot specialist" because inevitably, one in fifty of the miserable horses which he rides will be able, through the incorporation of unknown medicants, to stagger home in front of a field of horses as bad or slightly worse.

(In such cases, this jockey demands of the trainer before even dismounting that the proceeds of a hundred dollar bet be turned over to him instantly and refuses to believe that the trainer has not bet for him in at least this denomination. This has led to several very ugly and public scenes and once he was suspended ten days for attempting to bite the knee of a steward. His most notable achievement, in his chosen sport to date, has been his identification in one gossip column many years ago as a

playboy because he was seen "on the town" with a minor and fading starlet. The starlet was associating with him because he was her one and only reliable drug connection, but this falls totally outside the compass of narrative.)

At this time, the jockey's mood, in its bitterness and dismay, approaches Tony's. He has had a very bad series of unsuccessful sexual maneuverings having led him to question his height for the first time in several years, and in addition he has been in the siege of a long losing streak, forty-two or something like that. He knows that there will always be enough bad animals around these New York tracks to provide him with a minimal career but still he is being led into self-doubt, an emotion which he cannot really handle since there is so little of him. What he fears is that depression will lead him to a massive swelling of the sphincter which will in turn block evacuation and cause his weight to rise hopelessly despite all his efforts. He will go to one hundred and twenty-five pounds and will be reduced to exercising horses in the morning, jogging them hard in order to bounce his goddamned ass against the saddle in the hope that it will open and disgorge him by proxy onto the racetrack again. He is very prone to fantasies of this sort and allows them to create more internal disorder than, possibly, they are worth. Most of this jockey's problems come from the fact that like so many others in the profession he has an imagination and compulsion far beyond the reach of his sensibility. This drives him into compulsions far beyond the reach of imagination, the most extraordinary reactions merely to shield knowledge from himself.

"He win today?" the jockey asks, looking at Tony with dull eyes, cracking the whip over his head. "He lose? Or what? Give me instructions, I do exactly what I am suppose to do." All of this is said in light of the fact that this

jockey has already ridden Make Peace three times, in his three most recent races in fact, and probably knows somewhat more about the refinement of the horse's peculiar habits than the trainer. Nevertheless, this is the only way in which the jockey can express his own aggression, much as Tony works through false tips. The trouble with trainers and jockeys is that for all their seeming control and autocracy, they have very few options. Professional actors could talk to this point with vigor.

"What do you think you're supposed to do?" Tony says harshly. "You know the damned horse better than I do. How the hell can I tell you how to make him run?" He does not like this jockey very much, to tell the truth of it, and the only reason he continues to use him is the insistence of the jockey himself who swears that he and the late owner had a close relationship and the jockey's continued relationship with the horse was in the nature of a dying request. Tony does not believe this but has no better ideas. "You think I've got the goddamned race set up for you and all you got to do is to take it home? What the hell kind of goddamned thinking is that supposed to be? I thought people from Europe were supposed to be smarter than us, goddamn it." In sadness, it must be admitted that Tony's rhetoric is quite limited.

"Don't know, boss," the jockey says, cheerfully enough. "I just try to follow the instructions, check what you want. First time you say, let him out on the front end; I let him out on the front end and he finish last. Next time you say rate him and I rate him right into the grandstand. The third time you say use your head, I use the head and the sonabitch almost throw me off. So this time I think maybe you try different advice. Maybe worse, I don't know. I stand here to listen, chief."

"You dirty frog bastard," Tony says, "you dirty arrogant son of a bitch, you should get packed into the rail

on a blind switch and go into the infield," but of course Tony does not say this at all; things would perhaps be much better for him (and for me) if he did, but at his present state of evolutionary development, so to speak, Tony has only reached the point where he can entertain this kind of discourse at the level of internal monologue. At some time in the future this may change, conditions permitting, but if it does it will probably happen only at a private time and in a context having nothing whatsoever to do with the racetrack. "Oh, I don't know," Tony says mildly enough, "maybe you can just, well, kind of rate him close to the pace into the homestretch, leaving enough ground to get wide and then set him down. Maybe he'll finish third that way, you never know. I'm not putting anything down on him though. No side bets. Not for you, not for me, not for no one. I got to let him run loose. You understand the record."

"Oh sure," the jockey says. "I understand everything; you say no bet it's no bet. Just give him some good exercise and maybe we all have something to sing about in ten minutes, yes? Maybe a bet is down if he wins, you know?"

Someone in the paddock says, "Riders up." (It might even be me; I tend to get very involved in the affairs of this subpopulation and sometimes have the feeling that my subvocalizations are being broadcast at an ever-enlarging audience. This does not really discomfit me since I am sure that I would make a superb track announcer in other circumstances.) Then the groom leads Make Peace to where the jockey is standing. The jockey winks at Tony and in a little springing leap hurls himself into the saddle from which he regards Tony now with a strange revulsion which always comes from a sense of elevation. Make Peace twitches and his coat seems to break into a premonitory sweat as the jockey whispers something in his ear. What he whispers is an ancient and

terrible Gallic curse which he has employed with his mounts for some time now; it may not make them run any better but it most certainly does not make them run any worse.

They parade uneasily in concert around the walking ring as certain horseplayers lean uncomfortably over the rail to direct comments to the jockeys. It seems that they believe Make Peace's rider has not ridden as well in the last race as he might have were he truly motivated.

Tony, mumbling a bit himself, walks from the groom toward the horsemen's exit. He could, if he wanted, remain in the ring and accompany jockey and horse to the track entrance but at this moment he finds himself overcome by a kind of revulsion. Not for one more instant, he feels, can he bear to stand by and watch the activities before him; this horse has hurt him very personally and profoundly. It is as if the horse, in its incompetence, has rejected all of Tony's history, and the trainer, although he does not quite understand this yet, takes his work far more seriously than he would like to admit. It is a fact that he wants to win desperately with this horse; if not today then at some time in the near future, but every sight of the animal only goads him into furious and renewed realization of the pointlessness of his life. He cannot make a bad horse good. Make Peace has turned worse under his ownership, now his hocks have turned outward and the horse's eyes are dull with a complex intimation of defeat which even the most optimistic of horseplayers would have to note. Make Peace looks as if he is in the throes of a terminal illness.

"You gonna win today with this horse, Miller?" someone says over the fence and Tony shakes his head, looking at the ground, trying to act as if he were the assistant trainer or groom, but this doomed horseplayer knows faces as well as names and says, "Miller, you son of a

bitch, go back to Dover Downs and stiff them there," referring to the little known fact that Tony, years ago, was involved in a nasty drugging incident at that little track.

"Drop dead, you bastard," Tony says, containing the words behind his lips but does not know if he is talking to the horseplayer or only to himself. Before the incident he had been leading trainer at Dover. He finds himself thinking of that now—his lost promise, his broken possibilities—and increases his pace. The trouble is that there is no part of your history which is not, somewhere, labeled, filed, and part of the public domain.

It is at this instant, when Tony removes a new cigar from his pocket and chews it, licks his lip, imagines that the horseplayer talking to him is dead, that I make my entrance. It is about time; I have, after all put up with so much on this day: Simmons's apostasy, Mary's stupidity, my own growing dismay, a nest of other aspects which I will not go into here, but there are limits to this as to all other things and perhaps I have now passed them. "Hey you," I say, settling upon a fashionable bluntness as, perhaps, the easiest way to set the tone. "Hey Tony. The horse is going to win today. Sure as hell he's going to win. Stick a hundred on him, just for yourself. No one will ever know. Go on, do it: what the hell. You don't want that frog bastard to put him over behind your back, do you? I know how his mind works."

This is not the first of my interventions. Tony thinks that he now knows how to deal with them. "Cut it out," he mumbles. "Cut it out. If I go crazy, let me do it in my own bed with the sheets pulled up over my head. Please. I'll find a fast track. Let it not be right in the clubhouse walking ring. Give a man a break. Oh Jesus, I'm hearing voices again."

"You're not crazy, Tony. This is reality. Don't you think our—our relationship is getting a bit ridiculous? I

mean, sooner or later, we've got to talk; there's no way you can keep on avoiding the issue. I'm only trying to help you out, Tony."

"It ain't here. There's nothing here. It's just my nerves and losing all the time and tension. I know what it's like. Okay, okay, I'll take a week off starting soon and rest up. Then my nerves will be back in shape and no more voices."

It is at this point that all of our discussions to date have terminated. So Tony has a predictable ease of ritual accomplished as he moves swiftly through the conversation, but there is no time for me to dissemble now. I have realized, with a thrill of yearning, that matters have reached quite a critical pass. Conditions are clipping right along. "Throw a c-note on him, Tony," I say. "You listen to me, you spot a hundred on that horse right now or I'll make you scream fuck you! right at the stewards and that will be the end of the trainer's license—to say nothing of all those nifty little arrangements with the other public trainers. I'm onto you, Tony. I've been following you for weeks. A c-note Tony and toss a fin on it for the groom or your first fuck you comes out in thirty seconds."

Oh yes. Oh yes indeed, my speech has an effect upon Tony—although it is not exactly what I have calculated. I have misjudged his stubbornness, his desperate sense of connection to what he likes to think of as the normative life. "Oh you son of a bitch," he says. "Real or not I don't care. Who has to take this kind of crap? Get the hell out of here *right now,*" Tony says and, squeezing his fists, closes his eyes tightly and tries through extraordinary force of will to remove me. If my origin were sheerly metaphysical (it is not although my tenants often think so) or psychic (it has nothing to do with that at all) the gesture would probably succeed, Tony having an extraordinary if limited sense of presence, but under the given

circumstances, it is, of course, futile. But it is enough of this. It is a call for action as clear and beautiful as the sound of the bugle to the post. It demands that I take measures of my own. Time is limited and factors, otherwise very much in hand, would go out of control entirely were I to allow Tony's gesture to succeed.

And so it is then, in the passageway between the walking ring and the clubhouse, that I am forced to commit an act which I know will be regretted forever after. I am sorry about this. Our orders are peculiarly explicit after all: we are to accomplish our mission at a maximum of general devastation but we are not, under most circumstances, to bring undue pain to any individual. It is as if the bureaucracy enables us to perform the most shocking acts upon abstractions while deferring to our basic instincts for the concrete which are always kind, gentle, and somehow benign. The fact is that I find it almost unbearably repellent to do any of these people injury, although I know that they deserve only a maximum of dislocation. This sense of ambivalence, this peculiar feeling of balancing delicately between two alternatives equally poisonous adds in no little degree to the pain of this assignment and is something which I will want investigated carefully at some quiet, enclosed time. Perhaps during a sabbatical. Meanwhile, and with all this regret to the contrary, I perform certain adjustments upon Tony's nervous system, cause two synapses to lapse in their conjunction most alarmingly, create an electrical framework in a lower synapse which filters through sensations subtly altered and, then, with a scuttling gesture, I take the whole bloody network in psychic arm and I—

But why go into it? It is, after all, primordially disgusting. There is something about the very nature of biology which repels me: one understands that situations and their fulfillment can come only from organism; that it is the pulsing of fluids through stems which generates

all of those actions and reactions which make the reversal of entropy possible. Still, the sheer corporeality—they are so *disgustingly* corporeal—of these people is nothing on which I intend to dwell.

I do the necessary. I do what has to be done. Throughout the procedure, I don blinkers and a shadow roll to shield me from too close an apprehension of the mount's reaction to track conditions. A noseband would have been helpful to accompany the shadow roll but I have no nose, not even its equivalent. The entire action takes less than three-tenths of a second, objective time, although for its subject it seems to go on and on. To Tony it seems he is moving endlessly on a frozen, unrolling strip of track, working out furlongs and furlongs on a cold plain without furlong poles, looking agonizingly for a finish line that cannot exist. Excruciating! enough even to cause me to lose momentary control of myself and to whinny in response, a failure rare in one as disciplined as the undersigned. But Tony is restored, although his condition is understood to be irrevocably changed. He looks at me, driven, desperate, and then the wall begins to crumble for the first time, the wall begins to crumble for real. It is now as if the massive iron of the tote itself has become disassembled and from the secret heart of the machinery pours forth numerology: odds spill out and calculations and possibilities, illuminating our stricken features in the sudden fluorescence, the central mystery finally exposed for all that it is worth, and it flickers before us as Reason shyly pops its head over the wall and nods at me. I return Reason's nod and in that doomful silence we exchange a look of perfect understanding and then join, never to be separated again.

In the distance the crowd mutters. A horse has tossed its jockey and is running free on the track. (Fortunately the horse is the favorite, not Make Peace.) The tote flickers to a new set of odds reflecting this disaster. Birds

flicker and wheel in the sky. The bugler blows a mournful recitatif and departs.

"All right," Tony says, "all right. *All right!* What do you want me to do? Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. But you listen to me you son of a bitch: I'll do it and the hell with the whole thing—but I don't believe a word of it. Not a word of it, do you understand me? And I never will. What should I do? Tell me."

And talking gently, insistently, calm Reason helping to buttress my tones, I guide Tony toward the one hundred dollar window (a flock of horseplayers following us like dogs tracing out a bitch) and tell him exactly what to do. And then, to be on the safe side, I make him do it.

CHAPTER VIII

Simmons removes his resources and considers them at some length in the vanquished silence of his furnished room. He has three hundred dollars in an unadmitted cash hoard, fifty-seven dollars and twenty-five cents in silver quarters, and a bank passbook indicating that a minimum deposit of one dollar is being retained until the end of the interest period. He has been holding the three hundred out on me, the son of a bitch; there is no end to their duplicity. There is no value to his possessions, although he does feel a certain sentimental attraction to his back issues of *Turf & Sport Digest*, some of which go back consecutively to October of 1953. He shakes his head at the small secret pile and then, muttering, goes to the window and considers the outside for a long time. It is really strange that he would have been able to have held back the three hundred on me; it means that my methods are not yet conclusive—this must not happen again. It is a five-floor vault to the street and he thinks of this possibility without enthusiasm or hope. His consciousness remains at rest, its pendulum suspended dead center, waiting for further urgings. The small, shrieking, internalized voice which has brought us this far is now gone. At my instructions, he sits on the bed, puts his palms flatly on the blankets and then heaves himself into

a crouching position, cupping his hands to his ears. He seems to be in the starting gate.

The marshal talks to him patiently, lovingly, insistently, confidentially, at great length. He takes his time. There is no reason to rush. The gates are locked. Certain basics have been accomplished and it can be assumed that in certain senses, Simmons and the marshal now have all the time in the world.

He nods understandingly. His eyes flicker. One can sense a simulacrum of the old Simmons in the glare that slowly, wistfully, fades back to blank. A hint of his old horseplaying energy returns as his larynx barks harsh symbols of agreement. "Yep! Yep! Yep!" The marshal soothes him, comforts him, leads him down the alternative byways of fulfillment and he must spend, Simmons and the marshal, several hours talking on this bed and—oh yes indeed!—what an intense and meaningful rapport we have when it is all concluded.

It is all quite wonderful and means that I was right about everything after all. Dismayed in certain subtle ways by the collapse of Tony's resistance I can nevertheless understand this: I have pushed him very hard. It was to be expected. Everything is to be expected. Everything fits together. Nothing is changed. All moves in a slow and sweltering constancy, embracing the future like fish in a pond might absorb the slow sift of food poured by the keeper into those cool and greenful depths. Light on the water, flicker of silver, birds dancing in the air.

CHAPTER IX

A race:

The horses, panting, terrified, are forced into position. They never outgrow their fear of the starting gate; they only learn to fear punishment the more. The gates are locked. Starters and assistants shout at one another. In the enclosure of the stalls, the horses whinny and stamp, shaking their heads, trying to dislodge the bits. Jockeys hang on and whisper curses or comforts to them. The 35-1 shot and the 6-5 favorite alike twitch their ears and caress the iron with their tails. A bell sounds, locking pari-mutuel machines against further wagering, and the gates open.

The horses stumble to the track, some of them moving quickly, others caught in a slow frieze of dismay, finding their pace only irregularly. Jockey and horse fight for position, some of them diving into the rail which will give them the least amount of ground to cover, others moving to the outside where they will be free at last of the other horses. Moving down the backstretch they see the grandstand as a dim, thick, gray piling in the distance, catching the afternoon sun, pouring it back across the infield but the horses can see nothing, hear nothing, work the more intensely into the far turn as they come into the stretch. The early leaders, packed into the rail, are

beginning to lose stride now, fighting for wind, and the jockeys flail them harder. Some of the come-from-behind horses are looking for position, moving up on the outside, diving for holes in the clutter. The field staggers into the homestretch like bees scattering before a hand and the positions begin to change. Some horses fall back but on the other hand, other horses are coming forward. There is always a balancing action at work; nothing is constant.

Forty-seven and three-fifths for the half-mile. One minute and two for five furlongs. The jockeys begin to work on the horses with renewed energy, the sounds of the grandstand pouring over them in thick, uneven waves, speech vaguely discernible at the center. Curses, prayers, mutterings, threats. Giggles. Appeals. The last eighth of a mile takes only thirteen seconds or a little less, depending upon the class of the horses. Those massed at the front make one last vault as they approach the wire, seeming to disconnect slightly from the mud of the track as they hurl themselves toward the finish. Behind them, beaten horses are no longer punished. Jockeys on these beaten horses wave their whips for the sake of the customers but do little more than show them to the horses. (The horses understand. The horses understand everything.) The field goes under the finish line. The last horse, beaten fifteen lengths or so, may be two and a half seconds slower than the winner. Two and a half seconds! It is a small enough investment to make for such possibilities. Possibilities!

The result of the race is not yet official. Please hold all tickets. Tickets are held tightly. Men hawk and spit on the gray of the lawn. In the grandstand, customers press against one another to get a closer look. Numbers come onto the board. The crowd roars (in certain countrified tracks, it gasps). The result of the race is not official. The result of the race is now official and the winner is. Jock-

eys leap from their horses in the walking ring, nod to the stewards, and, hands on hips, stand on scales until the clerk says they may leave. They learn to submit to this kind of thing early. Moving from the paddock in small clumps, some of them talk earnestly, shaking their heads. A few stragglers, eyes wide and misunderstanding, are already fixated on the question of the next race.

Post time for the next race is. A man leaps from the grandstand and falls three stories, his body pulped like a flower at the instant of demolition. Another man says words to his fiancee (who he has brought there for what was to be a casual date) which he knows must destroy everything they have and which can never, under any circumstances, be taken back. A welfare client looks at the tickets on which he has invested a month's rent and wonders what will be the best line to take with his investigator. Three horseplayers at the top of the grandstand take rifles and begin to shoot at the tote, neatly puncturing the greenery and causing lights to wink. An old woman who has played Heart's Device as a hunch play dies of a cardiac seizure in the alleyway toward the gardens.

Seventeen children between the ages of five and eight run madly along the lawn, throwing empty beer cups at one another, screaming in a language which no one can understand. The infield quakes and seems to settle deeper. The swans in the lake see something and scatter in alarm. The sun becomes larger in the sky and begins to spit rays of poisonous illumination. The top eave of the grandstand breaks and five hundred people perish on the lawn still holding their programs, many of them with pencils in their hands. The track announcer misses a cue and is three minutes late getting back for the next race. The horses for the next race wait patiently in the paddock while the announcer is found. The announcer, it seems, has been copulating with a swan. The swan is cop-

ulating with a horse. The horse is copulating with his trainer. The trainer is copulating with a groom. The groom is copulating with a mutuel clerk. The mutuel clerk is copulating with a swan. Post time for the next race approaches. The race has taken one minute, thirteen and two-fifths seconds.

But ah! what speculation, what ecstasy, what degradation it has generated! the proportion of speculation-and-reaction to incident must be in the hundreds of billions to one. What to make of this?

What will one make of it? What does it mean? What can one say? Where is the beauty in it? Why does it all seem so beautiful? Why does it all seem so beautiful? Who would have thought—ah, who ever would have thought—that there would be so much pain in it?

CHAPTER X

Tony turns from the hundred dollar window with a dull glaze of sweat ringing that area from which he has just issued orders. He has bet his horse to win five times ("Is that ok, chief? five times on the nose? you want maybe to bet him place a couple of times? Up the bet? Anything you say, chief, I understand that the thing ain't personal at all and I just want to do the right thing here. Five hundred ok? Thanks.") and now wanders out toward the track to see what has happened to his money. He does not go into the walking ring or clubhouse pavilion as would be the trainer's right but instead walks abstractedly through the infield lawn and to the rail, a spot where he has not been for some twenty-five years when he was sixteen and used to stay out of school to watch some races. On the way he bumps into a tall, uncoordinated man who curses him and then goes back into private fugue. Simmons is on the line as well. I consider having them talk and then decide against it; there is plenty of time. To Tony the rail feels comfortable in his grasp, shiny and comforting and he holds onto it, his hands trembling only slightly from the exertion of squeezing. (Gently I lay a further pall on his mind to ease the panic; I owe him all the peace now that he can be given.)

When the horses spring from the gate, it seems to Tony that it is not so much as they are running before him or that the events are consequential; instead, all of this seems to be taking place on a distant planet, the language and customs of which Tony does not understand, and which he can greet only as a kind of exotica. "Well come on you old son of a bitch," Tony says, realizing that he hardly cares what happens to his horse. In fact, if pressed, Tony would not be able to tell you exactly on what he has bet; he knows that it is a horse with whom he is associated, somehow, but whether the association is professional or only in terms of the losing tickets is an issue beneath discussion.

"All right, number three," Tony cries and claps his hands ponderously like a seal. "Let's see some action now, number three. Whoa, number three! Hit it, baby!" There is an air of jollity to these encouragements. Tony has become jolly. He has become a jolly fat man. He has become a mindless jolly fat man. In fact, Tony is happier than he has been for two decades (not counting the first time he got laid) not that the source of the happiness can be traced back to anything which is happening to him because Make Peace is running one of his classic races, out of the post at 15-1. (For some reason the horse seems to be picking up a little action not even to be explained by Tony's five hundred. Who in hell could want to play him Tony's Reason wonders numbly.) The horse has raced wide throughout, has placed his muzzle clearly on the fleeing rump of the horse before him, and now, coming through the stretch, is running third like a projectile, a bullet-shaped form of power and substance neatly cleaving his way through the tracks of his predecessor as the jockey, whip in front of his nose, attempts to show the grandstand that classic European form which has made him so popular at Aqueduct for this and many seasons. The jockey beats on Make Peace's

withers, he digs his little knees into the horse's spine in a fashion designed to madden and excite, and Make Peace hangs like a checkroom. His form uncoiling loosely and with terrible grace he follows his predecessor across the wire and down the backstretch turn into eternity. Third.

The crowd applauds politely, saluting the victory of the 7-5 favorite who, unfortunately (I am a perverse creature but you must understand the stresses I have been under so recently and so long) drops dead exactly as he crosses the finish line and lies kicking in a kind of ecstasy as his jockey rolls off and eyes him with astonishment. The bettors murmur, mumble, consult rapidly among themselves: will the horse be disqualified by reason of having dropped dead at the finish? After some period of time, the judges conclude that this is not an indictable offense since the cause of death cannot be presumed, ipso facto, to have been the cause of victory and the number of the late winner goes on the board.

Tony stands over the rail, both wrists hanging loosely over sewage and says, "How about that? How about that? five hundred dollars right into the gut, and the winner drops dead. What a race! What a race! Never saw anything quite like it." Tony's tones are mild, remonstrative; he is not so much a participant as a commentator, and between these short bursts of phrase, or perhaps the word should be song, his eyes seem to go blank. The five hundred in losing tickets hang unbidden in his shirt pocket until he reaches inside and, whistling, destroys them. He seems to feel that he has business back in the paddock but cannot imagine what it might be; as far as he knows he is perfectly content, leaning here over the rail at Aqueduct, five hundred dollars to the contrary and hope you are the same. "How about that?" Tony says again, "How about that? How about that?" and demurely enough I tell him about that, whisper to him in confidential tones, gently and lovingly guide him

through the spaces of the infield and toward the clubhouse. And I talk all the time, talking, talking, inexhaustibly talking, my teeny-tiny voice filling the wilderness of his mind so to speak, and by the time I have escorted Tony to his car in the trainer's area and have made clear to him exactly what must be done now we are in perfect accord.

Perfect accord. Reason and I join *a capella* in song over the embers of Tony's psyche. It has all been very simple. It is merely a question of being realistic about many things. How about that, dig that cat?" Tony sings as he drives us sweetly all the way into Manhattan and the secret Army surplus store that only he and the favored few know. The surplus store that sells grenades, rifles and incendiary bombs at cost, simple cost, right from the battlefields to you and not a cent of vigorish in it.

Building up the margin.

CHAPTER XI

Third Recitatif (*Retrospective*): In the beginning, there were recriminations. There would have to be. All agents have them. Altering the state of a sentient race, soul of creation in all living people, mechanical pantheism and so on. Obliteration of possibility, the implosion of outcome. The usual. This is all part of the context in which we work. We are warned against it in training. Clearly warned. That it is not of any. Significance. Of no significance and cannot be. Unduly involved, or concerned by. Something happens to the smooth, insistent flow of my rhetoric when I tap areas of policy; it is as if chunks of glass were being rammed through Mary's throat during a process of expectoration. I think that Mary would know what I am talking about, likewise Simmons. Tony as well. Gardner? The question is: how about the Bureau themselves? Can this be understood at the remove of many parsecs and granted the glowing alienation which assaults me at this time? It is very hard to say. One finds it difficult to make orderly reason of this. There is no set pattern to any of it.

It remains to the nature of their drives, that is the fascination. No less motivated than any of us, no less driven than the least of us—but how narrow, how narrow! Simmons dreams of a Daily Double (or I should say

dreamed; Simmons is beyond all of that nonsense right now) and this double of which he dreams will be for four thousand, eight hundred and seventy six dollars even. It will manage to disengage him not only from his difficulties but his history. Blown free, into some new angle of perception, he will be Simmons Ennobled or at least Simmons de-Crucified. He knows exactly how it will happen. He will wheel two outside shots in the first two races with everything in the second and when one of his selections wins the first, paying $341.80, Simmons will have all the possibilities in the double covered, the least of them on the wheel paying some two thousand dollars. Just before the second race begins he will lean easily over the rail and the jockey on the nearest horse will say, "Jack, you got a big one," just as if he (the jockey) is acting only for Simmons. And then the race will begin and the third choice will pull away from the field by yards and yards, winning by daylight and causing Simmons to giggle because he will be unable to understand how they can do something like this for him. But in any event he will be a winner and put all of the metaphysics to the side, scampering to the two dollar show window to collect his double gently, modestly. Bowing to the throngs assembled behind him, he will tip the clerk five dollars. The clerk will beam and shrug modestly and Simmons will leave Aqueduct rapidly by a side (to avoid highwaymen) entrance and hire a limousine to return him to his rooms for the last time. He will mumble to the driver all the way back about his terrible losses so that the driver will not be moved to assault him and take everything away. At destination, he will pay the driver twenty dollars and hop off into his rooms, he thinks. And then—

And then—

Well, it is difficult to speculate exactly what Simmons's thoughts comprise past this point; he has not thought it

out clearly. Dim images of horses, women, newspapers, steak dinners, rising elevators, breasts assault him but in truth none of these hold for him half the viability and interest of what he will do immediately upon collecting his winnings. This is one of those ironies to which I have referred throughout. Of course, Simmons has no plans. The track has defined his time for so long now that without it to structure his day it is quite hopeless. Perhaps he will go back on the following day and lose everything. It is worth considering, it lessens the guilt feelings.

Mary, on the other hand, dreams of a forest of bills, thick and the consistency of dough in her hand. They will come not from a double (Mary is afraid of the lines on the double) but from a 300-1 shot that shakes loose from the pack and in response to Mary's glare, Mary's bleat, Mary's necessity, will scamper home lengths and lengths to the good. And she will take the money (about seven thousand dollars in return for her twenty-five dollar bet) and take the bus instantly to the residence of her son where, in the presence of his wife and four intent little daughters, she will throw the bills one by one in his face, every cent of it, telling him as she does so exactly what she thinks of him (nothing), exactly what she thinks of his life (nothing), exactly what he means to her (nothing), exactly what she will have to do with him (nothing), and then she will parade in military scavenger's triumph back to her apartment, snatching tasteful objects from surrounding garbage cans to add to her collection. And then the losing streak will be broken.

The winning streak will continue; she will win and win and win with a ferocity she has never found for losing, and althqugh most of the money will come on chalk there will be a fine lavender of longshots. She will build up an enormous estate, five thousand dollars at least, and she will leave every cent of it—every penny that is—to the invisible track announcer who has so kindly called all

of her horses home. This will take care of Julian and perhaps herself. The track announcer has been there for over forty years and is certainly due for retirement if not thinking of it.

Tony's fantasies are more practical, having largely to do with triumphant rides in stages, the conversion of lame and staggering animals into bright-eyed and fleet handicap horses so gifted as to do even a Frenchman's bidding. Tony's mind is not as explicit of these matters as the other two. (Tony after all is actually in the game and can be presumed to know a thing or three.) For that reason, I have never found his fantasies as interesting. This may be why he was the first to Alter although I wish it could have been committed in a less abrupt fashion.

And Gardner—I see that I have not yet introduced Gardner; we will have much to say of him presently. His fantasies are the most complex of all, having largely to do with fugal forms of devastation of which he already understands his bets, in part, to be metaphors. Gardner is extremely intelligent.

What do they want? It is questions like these which now rankle as almost none of the others do; this is not metaphysical torment or sociological upheaval but simply basics of the most mundane kind. What are they after? What might they have in mind? What did they intend to do about all of this? Left on their own, what were their plans? Where do they get the gall? Do these fantasies, in any way complement that is to say interact with the wonder, mystery and overwhelming terror of the track?

For that matter, what *are* they doing at the grandstand entrance? Where is the gain in it? What do they imagine? What is the point? Surely they realize that they are throwing themselves again and again into the jaws of machines so implacable and mysterious that they can be sure of nothing except that those machines will extract—*will remove from them*—seventeen percent of their com-

mon reality everytime they come out of it? How do they not understand this? And what would the consequences be of an ineluctable reduction of seventeen percent from reality nine times a day? Fifty-four times a week. Fifteen hundred times a year.

And what is the difference?

One must cultivate, as Headquarters would say, a certain mythical sense of distance, a truly grandiose detachment which would enable one to function in this void purposefully and move toward that destiny which awaits all of us. But it is not easy.

Perhaps it concerns the landscape of the minds in which I am trapped. They are all urban blight: depressions and garbage surrounding a small evil glint of jewelry which may shine in the night but in the day only acts, through its own devices, to destroy the very air which surrounds them. The horseplayer being an urban phenamenon.

One must, however, be ordered. I have gone this far. I can finish the job. The major work has been done. Plans have been laid, groundwork blasted. All that is left are the few necessary turnings and gropings to blast the thing free past history. Hold on for two days more, three at the most, and the job will be done. I will hold on. I am invulnerable. There is nothing to touch me. I am unique, omnipotent, and totally in control. I know it.

Yet I cannot escape this recent and insane urge of mine: the urge to bet a 40-1 shot. Just for the hell of it. To see what happens. But where, oh where in hell would I get the goods to lay on the crippled animal? And in what coin would they pay me?

CHAPTER XII

Gardner: Gardner is the key to all of them. (He will set off the chain reaction.) We must, with as much delicacy as possible, subsume Gardner and try to understand him. But of them all, Gardner is the hardest to contain.

See him. See him now! He is copulating with a girl. Underneath him she lies, stretched and open to the skin, mouth against his, her breasts thrown into his chest, impaled on the point of his erect organ which I should say is already penetrating her with enthusiasm and efficacy, blasting Gardner toward an orgasm which he can already see as clearly as the hot hand of the tote dropping a horse to post time tells him that once again he has been shut out of an angle. She is moaning, speaking to him in the most ancient and constant of their tongues and after a fashion he is talking back, if unh! uh! and ah! can be considered within the terms of dialogue. Gardner communes with the girl on the aural as well as a sexual level; it is an old ability; he is having a rowdy fuck. I regard them with some interest.

I do not find their act of generation to be as self-contained as other things; it has always had some power to move me. Universals exist, some comity is known. Pity and terror tug at one another within this shell. How they heave! How they puff! How they groan and suffer! One

understands that only such creatures as they could emerge from this pain. How stifled from grace. How distant from comfort. And yet they enact those qualities to excess and call them love. Love! *Love!* Who is to understand? Who would want to understand? What is there to know? What fury in an angle! Blind conjunction, coincidence, and connection! See them copulate! Watch them! Watch them . . .

Gardner works upon the girl with devouring intensity, managing to force, in these final moments, all thoughts of horses and horsemen from his mind. He has had a very, very bad day at the racetrack: a forty-dollar day, in fact, and since this represents almost half of his weekly take-home salary, it can only be interpreted as a disaster. (But Gardner enjoys disasters and the feeling of consequentiality they bring. Where? he asks himself, where would he be if the racetrack did not endlessly provide a sense of proportion, put him in continual touch with his destiny?) Still, he is free of it for the time, tumbling into a well of feeling which buckles and opens before him.

Ah! the girl groans. (She is yielding and permissive and naive enough to still enjoy sex.) Oh! Gardner shrieks and performing small rites upon her distended breasts, Gardner distributes into her the full load of his love, laying it down in a screaming procession that seems to wind away from him timelessly and he can follow it only a little while before he descends into fog. He lies atop her dreaming.

The girl, still in the throes of her own orgasm forces him up and down atop her, congealing her limbs for reciprocity but Gardner does not care. He wants only to rest. It is not precisely that he is selfish—Gardner has a true and meaningful sense of proportion—but only that at the completion of the act of generation he likes to obtain a feeling of power by transcending it, denying his own needs. Sometimes this has worked out well. At other

times it has not. Gardner, who is only twenty-eight, feels that he has some time left to investigate the various alternatives offered.

After a time, the girl stops, her head lolling away in disinterest, her mouth opening to pour syllables upon Gardner to which he listens with little interest as for some moments she tells him exactly what she thinks of him, thinks of the act of sex, thinks of his approach to the act of sex, thinks of sex from the psychological standpoint. The majority of these comments are complimentary and would have pleased Gardner greatly five or ten minutes ago, but now they fall upon him only peripherally, like absent pellets of horse droppings falling from the tails of longshots before a big race.

He mumbles and shakes his head, moving down lower upon her. He wants to sleep, to dream. He looks for her breasts. She removes herself from under him however and continues talking. This time her conversation is somewhat less generalized. Gardner tries to shut off this discourse as he has turned off the rest but it is not so easy; the girl's rhetoric seems to have moved from a casually obbligato second violin to a more determined, carefree first, and he can no longer impose theme and mood atop her easy fifths and thirds. There are no more fifths and thirds. Instead, she is trying to force thematic material through, and at last Gardner turns his head and shakes himself into sweating alertness, disentangles his limbs from there and says, "Listen, I told you we couldn't. We can't until things look up for me. I'm just not making that kind of money now, Virginia."

Virginia—for that is her name, although she has always resented its somewhat stodgy overtones and has done her modest best, in person, to act against it—says, "But I'm working too, Gardner. My income and your income together are plenty. I mean I'm getting tired of living this way. A girl's entitled to some security."

"What living?" Gardner says and rises to a seated position. "What security?" Now, in the half-gloom of his bedroom, he can be seen to be a man of normal height, features, coloring, etc., the usual design of hair; in fact, his prior resemblance to a large hen poised hawking over a crate of hard-laid eggs has now disappeared, although Gardner would appreciate the compliment as little as the description. (I love invective; when it is correct it is so final.) "There's no security. When I get married I want to feel that I can support you. Otherwise, what's the point? Can't we leave it like that for a while?"

He leans upon her and begins to move his hands on the girl's stomach, his intent being only vaguely sexual, but she pushes him away with determination and fury saying, "Now Gardner, come on. Be serious. I think it's time that we got serious, Gardner, because we really can't go on this way you know."

Serious! The girl wants him to be serious! Considering that it is at such-named moments that these people approach the depths of their folly, the request cannot be strictly well-meant as the saying goes and yet it appears to have the proper effect upon Gardner. Heaving, neighing, he disengages himself fully from the girl and stumbles away, turns on various lights, flicks on a large fluorescent contraption above the couch, takes a sheet and idly tosses it to the girl so that she can cover herself but not, it must be noted, because he has taken a last look at her and has constructed in his mind a series of lascivious pictures and speculations which he knows will serve him well later in the event that the conversation does not work out well. He mumbles, shakes his head, takes a bathrobe from the closet and dons it grumbling, then removes a pack of cigarettes from his bedroom and lights one. Lights two. Hands one to the girl. Takes the other for himself.

(I realize that this issue of cigarette lighting and

smoking has become the sandwich layer filling scores and scores of inferior novels by hacks who know no other proper way to get their characters through transitions from one room or emotional state to the next but what am I to say? I did not invent Gardner; I am stuck with him and Gardner is a chain-smoker.)

Gardner Quant and Virginia are both intensely heavy smokers. They feel that no proper discussion or drama is functional unless it is supported or enveloped by clouds of fumes, wisps of grayness already circling their heads like halos. And although Gardner is convinced that the habit will ultimately sever him from life short of his normal span, he cannot stop. Neither can Virginia, although her speculations are similar. What a pleasant, pleasant surprise it will be for both of them when they find out (thanks to my ministrations) that their unhappy addiction has cost them not one second of time, not one errant heartbeat! It will utterly delight them or would, were they not to be occupied otherwise.

"Listen, Virginia," Gardner says. (I am now going to compress a great deal of dialogue into quite a short space. This is in order not only to reduce the acreage of this journal but to establish that my sense of order and transmutation have not degenerated in these miserable surroundings, these people will not get to me.) "It's impossible for us to get married. I'm only at the GS-7 level as you know with the cutbacks and so on and with the problems with funding from the administration, I don't think I'll be GS-11 for at least three more years. GS-11 is the minimum salary for what we'll need to live. Also, as you must understand, Virginia, I am devoted to the horses—far more so than is normal for a man of my age. I know we've disagreed about this many many times and there hasn't been a word you've ever said that hasn't stung me and made me feel deeply regretful and moved . . . but the thing is I have this problem with the horses.

I know I can't beat them but there's something in me that won't let me give them up. I feel I've got to have a clear shot at it and find out once and for all if it's *really* true that I can't beat them or if it's only an emotional block that's kept me from following my intellect, and now with this new field position I'm able to get out in the afternoons and make the track *every single day* except for Mondays of course when I have to cover the phones in the unit on my emergency day but every single *day* except that I can get out there for at least a couple of years until they catch up with what I'm doing and fire me. I love you Virginia. I really do love you, you know, no question about it, it isn't just the propinquity that made me get involved with you and I think that you're the most important person in the world to me right now . . . but I just don't know if it's *people* that I need or something *else*. Anyway, Virginia, and I have to be terribly honest about this with you because we decided at the very beginning that honesty was going to be the most important part of our relationship or we wouldn't have it all, anyway, the thing is that I'm still so goddamned involved with the horses that I get sick at night watching them run when I can't sleep. I'm so involved with them even after all the talking we've done and so on that sometimes when I'm making love to you I'm not even thinking about you but about the tote board or the odds or some angle on an entry tomorrow or a jockey switch. I have to confess that to you and I do it straight out because that's how I feel. Now, you wouldn't want to marry a man like that, would you? Or would you? I'd think the less of you if I thought that you could."

The effect of all this compression, of course, is to give not only Gardner but the scene a kind of frozen-time aspect. Gardner, stumbling through torrents of rhetoric and revelation in a high-speed frame which is entirely

out of synchronization with the background, the background remaining mottled and slightly blue, showing its age. Gardner in his hundred-year-old apartment (all apartments in that city are a hundred years old, either that or brand new), Gardner taking his ease by being uneasy. Gardner! Whatever alteration has been performed upon him, however, is as nothing to what happens to his girlfriend.

Unlike him, fashionable bluntness is her method of speaking, and now, as I recapitulate her end of the discussion, things seem to go quite out of control. I have the feeling, transcribing these notes hurriedly, that I am chasing a single line of rhetoric unsuccessfully through alleys and byways. The rhetoric is getting away from me however and the situation in full is analogous to Gardner's own sensations as he watches the fleeing rump of a favorite bidding a permanent farewell to one of his long-shot specials. I do not know if I am putting this together in the most efficacious format but one thing must shine through: the ultimate perversity of it.

Even when stripped to the essentials of their appeal, they must dissemble. Why? This is not a question which I would expect to have answered within my brief span here, brief by their standards that is to say, by mine it is becoming horribly extended and it is taking on that timeless sense of mortification so clearly associated with gangrene or other allied and hopeless diseases.

"That's nonsense, Gardner," Virginia is saying meanwhile. (I am already hopelessly far behind and lost in transcription; I know now that like almost all the rest of it, three-fifths is beyond me forever.) "I don't believe that you're really that interested in the horses; it's just an *excuse* you've held on to in an effort to avoid your responsibilities. No one as serious about horses as you pretend to be could *possibly* be losing as much money as often as you are over such a period of time. Gardner, it's

over fifty dollars a week! You're losing half your salary! If I wasn't around to get you through the last couple of days before payday, I can't imagine what would happen to you! The thing is that you think if you can keep on losing money at the horses the responsibility for getting married is off your shoulders and you don't really have to make mature choices but that's very unhealthy, Gardner. I took this course at the New School and I understand all the psychology in it.

"But look, I just don't have the patience anymore. I'm not getting any younger, Gardner, and I can't afford not to get married because there's really nothing else I particularly want to do. I mean, I want to marry you. You're all right and everything like that but if I can't I'll marry someone else. You're not the only man who likes by body you know and there are a whole lot of other things about me that I don't think you've really noticed.

"Anyway, Gardner, you're going to have to come to a decision. I'm giving you two days. Today is Wednesday, June 8th and I'm going to leave now. I'm not going to spend the night here again and I'm not going to come into the office tomorrow either. I'll take sick leave so that means you won't be seeing me for at least two days.

"I'm giving you until Saturday June 11th, three days from now at the same time for you to make your decision about this one way or the other. Either you come to me and tell me that you understand my position and you'll stop all this nonsense to meet your responsibilities, get married to me that is, or we're finished Gardner. If you don't come to me saying that on Saturday night then I'll understand. I'll know you really don't want to get married and you want to bring the thing to an end.

"And that way I'll call in Monday morning and quit. I hate the job anyway and the only reason you should know that I've kept there is to be near you, but I have no other reason to stay. You'll have two days on your own to

think this whole thing over and decide what you're going to do. That should be time enough and I think that three days is perfectly fair considering that this thing has been going on for more than three years.

"No, Gardner, don't say a thing to me, don't tell me this or that because I won't listen. There's nothing you can say to me now that will change this. I've spent a long time getting to this decision and now it's definite. It's a definite thing for me. No, don't try any sex either, Gardner, that won't work. I've had enough sex for the evening, once is really enough for me if it's done right, and you do it right. That's something you'll have to learn to live with when we get married. I'm not crying, Gardner, that won't work either. I'm not crying."

Under certain circumstances, they can talk at an extended length and in their own eyes persuasively. This is something that must be kept in mind for the permanent records. Conviction such as they have is rare in this sector and might even explain many of their difficulties.

"I didn't ask you if you were crying," Gardner is saying. "For God's sake Virginia, that wasn't it, now *listen* to me. Saturday is Belmont day. They're running the Belmont at Aqueduct on Saturday, and it isn't fair. It isn't right."

"What isn't fair or right?"

"Well, Virginia, I mean the Belmont is a very important race. It's probably the single most important race in the country and every year you pin the whole season to it. The President comes. Half the cabinet is there. It's kind of the climax to a whole New York season, even though the season has six months to run after it. People thing about the Belmont, Virginia; I mean they really can get involved. It isn't fair to force a decision like that on me just before an important race like that, I mean, Virginia, there's an angle to the Belmont. *Several* angles in fact. I've got to be free to consider—"

"Well I'm sorry, Gardner, that's exactly the kind of thing you're going to have to outgrow," she says and very competently she dresses, tucking all of her neatly inside a series of clothes which do not so much shield as insulate, and goes to the door of the apartment. From there she bestows upon him a final look of appeal and desire, although it may only be pity and terror (or perhaps love and trust: any combination of emotional states will do) and then, taking her overnight bag from the corridor (She had originally been supposed to stay all night. What the hell is *with* these women? Gardner thinks.) she goes through the door and bids him goodnight. Gardner hears her pattering on the stairs; presently he hears nothing at all, and in the empty spaces of his living room he now sits, lighting a new cigarette with the end of the old one, to consider all of this further.

He twitches. At the moment he seems bereft of answers. Peripety has never been Gardner's strongpoint. His specialty is composed of a smooth, even set of transitions rising inevitably to the next race, the next bet, the slick engine of a parley. As well as he thinks he knows Virginia, the fact of the matter is that she has upset his life style and functioning to the point where he feels the best thing to do would not to think at all for some time. Unhappily, this is not possible. As always my time is limited and now with the armaments to be procured, I have numerous small crusades to perform before the evening is over. I must find some reliable dealers and a good pamphlet or two on assembly.

She had no right, Gardner thinks. I mean, she had no right. It all could have worked out some way but she couldn't push it. It had to come right. Who's going to win the Belmont anyway? Why are they all out to get me? Is it possible that geldings can beat fillies $3,000 higher on the claiming level? What does it all mean?

What does it come to? What would the effect be of weight at a route? Is it really five lengths for five pounds or are they exaggerating? What determines the class of the horse? How important is condition to class? What's the purpose? What are we living for?

(This is the way he thinks. Although splendidly organized in discourse, his mind and rhetoric prove to be disheveled and virtually uncontrollable in the interior monologue; amorphous thoughts whirl about some center dimly pieced out of drift and wreckage. In the midst of this sea, small obsessions dart like fish into the stream. Being in his mind is somewhat like inhabiting a stagnant pool that yet, miraculously, contains one of the few remaining schools of a prized species of fish. There is a nugget of insanity in Gardner's mind, a pellet of madness so pure and undefiled that it absolutely defies description and makes him by far the most profound of all those with whom I have dealt. Of course the competition is limited.)

He shakes his head and mumbles inarticulately, apparently giving himself the answers to these questions. Neither of us, however, can interpret them. The gist of the answers seems to be negative, although Gardner believes in the inhibiting effects of poor condition upon class.

"Listen," I say, "she's really quite right, you know. You can't go on like this. Sooner or later, the thing has to stop. You're twenty-eight years old and your earlier promise can long since be seen to have disappeared under a flash-flood of tipsheets, programs, horoscopes and bureaucratic petitions. You aren't nearly where you intended yourself to be when this whole thing began, and furthermore you're getting further away from it all the time. She is, by all your standards you know, an extraordinarily pretty girl and it's a lucky thing that she's even having anything to do with you. There are plenty of

men in far better shape who couldn't get near a girl like this. Sooner or later, Gardner, you have to accept the realities."

"Listen old chap," he says. (Of all of them he is the most ingratiating and informal; it is true that we have a splendid relationship and have hit it off from the first. Finding no need to defend his sanity before me—Gardner believing himself to be totally insane—he has been letting me neatly through his defenses so that I can see him, so to speak, bare; also he has a cheerful, almost demure manner in our private dialogues which shows a rare part of him, the Private Gardner that is, which is far different from the public, investigatory Gardner who is the bane of almost all the social security clients within a certain housing project on the north shore.) "Listen, that's perfectly all right for you to say but you don't have responsibilities yourself, you understand. You look at this differently. Also, you're information is all wrong. If you want to know how I really feel, I have every intention of beating the horses someday. I happen to be not in the least self-destructive. She simply doesn't understand that it would be impossible for me to marry her until something decent happens. You wouldn't have any information, would you? Some angle tomorrow. No, I guess not; we've gone through that kind of thing before."

"As a matter of fact I do have some information," I say, leaning back casually, very much at ease, inhabiting the spaces of his mind with a grace and felicity which is rare and yet somehow familiar. Gardner's mind accommodates me comfortably indeed, swaddling me in layers of protective warmth which soothe and incite. They come so close to the spirit of Headquarters, as a matter of fact, that I am often driven quite beside myself by nostalgia. "I did not want to do this until we had come to the proper moment which would in the normal course of

events have been some time from now but the fact is that I do have some information old friend, and I think that it would be worth your while to follow it up."

"I'll say," Gardner says and puts out his cigarette, lights up another with an immediate flourish and regards me expansively. "You'd better believe I'd take a tip. Even from you. Mostly from you. I mean it's not my fault you understand, if I can't beat the races. I really want to, you know, so that I can get out of this entirely. Then I can marry Virginia and live in a middle-income housing project and make GS-11 and, who knows? maybe go to graduate school for my master's degree at night. Funnier things have happened. Accomplishment! A little accomplishment would be a great thing."

"Yes it would."

"Tell me the tip."

"Accomplishment would, however, have two aspects, Gardner. It might well raise you to a level of feeling you could not stand."

"Tell me the tip."

"Ah," I say. "There's a condition which I must make explicit. I'm not in the information business for my health, you know. For every action a reaction. You have to promise me most explicitly to follow up this tip. In fact, to bet it heavily. Your trouble is that you don't bet heavily, Gardner. You say you do but ten dollars a race is your limit. I'm afraid that you're a little bit of a dilettante, not that I hold that entirely against you, but you've allowed attitude to overrun condition by quite a bit."

"Of course, chief. Anything you say. I figure information from you would have to be legitimate. Why shouldn't I listen?"

"And don't call me chief," I say. "I don't really like it. Grant me my few peculiarities. I understand that you

have to cultivate a kind of borrowed flippancy to conceal the inner terror and I know full well that this rhetoric you use during stressful moments bears no relation to your vulnerable and rather gullible interior. You don't have to call me anything. You can just let our relationship define itself on its own terms."

"All right," he says, inhaling into the ashtray and then dropping the cigarette with a gasp. "All right, all right. I know nothing's your fault and nothing's my fault but this kind of thing isn't really necessary. I'll listen to what you have to say and that's it. I said, that's it. One shot and out. You sold me. Up to a point of course. Be reasonable. It isn't only the girl, it's other things. She's not the main course."

"You'll follow through?"

"Follow what through? I can't follow it through until I make some money."

"I'm talking about the tip, Gardner."

"Oh, the tip. Of course. Of course I'll follow through."

"I'm only checking, you understand. It's a question of evaluating intent. This is serious business, you understand. My motives here are very complex and not sheerly conversational."

"Just tell me," Gardner says, "just give me that damned tip. Lay it on me." He is attuned now, every fiber of his being tense and toward me, small thrills of blood coursing through his system, a sense of heightening and broadening at the hairline giving him the slightly wide-eyed aspect of a man who is nearing electrocution. His loins loosen slightly, his legs in the presence of the Ultimate Tip spread. Just as Virginia has opened before him so he is opening now, the eyelids fluttering. "Of course," he mutters. "Of *course* I want to get out of this. Who would want to stay in it? What kind of a lunatic would get involved with it in the first place if he had any kind of choice?"

"All right," I say. "All right. I trust you. But you better follow through."

"I'm listening. *I'm listening.*"

"Make Peace in the second tomorrow," I say.

Then, there is silence.

CHAPTER XIII

The Belmont. The Belmont is one of America's oldest horse races and certainly her most respected. Three year olds (fillies are rarely entered, however, it is too testing for their delicate limbs, their oft menstruating pudenda) are asked to run a mile and a half under scale weight of one hundred and twenty six pounds, the longest distance that any of them have ever raced and a good piece longer than all but the best of them will ever be asked to race again. The only American race run at the classic European distance of a mile and a half, it is important not only to trainers and horsemen, but to breeders who feel that the combination of speed and stamina which appears in the ultimate winner makes him far more desirable than any of the winners of other major stakes races at stud. If he has won any of the other races as well, of course, so much the better. A winner of the Belmont, in any event, can have his stud fees nearly doubled from whatever they would have otherwise been. With the tendency of good horses to break down earlier and earlier in these times (because of the financial pressures to race them too early too often) and the virtual failure of any good horse to run past the age of five or six, the winner of the Belmont is usually considered to be the most valuable stud prospect in his given age group and usu-

ally goes on toward a long and successful career of copulation and its consequences. Modern famous sires such as Prince Graustark or Son Excellence can make as much as twenty thousand dollars for a single service to a mare in heat.

Run continuously at Belmont until the early 1960's, the race was switched to Aqueduct in 1962 because the imminent collapse of Belmont's grandstand forced authorities to condemn the track. Belmont was subsequently rebuilt at a cost to state and horseplayer of several million dollars and the race was switched back to its natural terrain in 1968. There, restored to the felicity of its origin, it appeared to be set through at least the end of the century.

However, in 1972, there occurred at Belmont the famous riots following the Third Religious Revival held at that track during the winter. The first two revivals had been enormously successful and had succeeded in turning over to the New York Racing Association, as fifteen percent of all collections, several hundred thousand dollars. Who was to suspect that fanatics or their satellites went crazy in the cold? But by then it was too late. The race was thus again shifted to Aqueduct where it has been run ever since, to the dissatisfaction of many sentimentalists who only grudgingly have accepted reality. Two renovations within less than two decades were beyond the means of the state during the Welfare Decade.

The arson of 1973 completely destroyed the clubhouse and paddock areas of the abandoned track and the Racing Association, in that era of increasing social dislocation and taxation, announced formally that Belmont could not be rebuilt within the foreseeable future. Slated to be a commemorative historical site, Belmont was sold to the State University of New York which has instead decided to use the facilities to house faculty within the

near future, as soon as plans can come out of the architectural unit, that is.

The race has done little to enhance the fading prestige of Aqueduct in the bargain, but this is something which must be accepted as the price paid for maintaining tradition. Under its original conditions, and since Belmont was the only mile and a half circumferential track in the country, the race was run comfortably with both start and finish directly before the clubhouse under the wire. At Aqueduct, which is three-eighths of a mile shorter, it must start far back, near the stretch turn and the horses are compelled to make a long straightaway run into the clubhouse turn which negates much of the strategy of the race as originally planned. This has bothered no one in the grandstand, however, and weaker jockeys are happier with the additional distance in which to maneuver their horses and arrange their chances.

Many amusing and interesting incidents have characterized the entertaining history of the Belmont. In 1961, for instance, Sherluck, an also-ran in the preceding three-year-old classics, won and paid $123.00, still the longest price ever recorded for the event. Shortly thereafter the horse broke down and was retired. In 1959, Black Hills, a longshot ridden by a celebrated jockey, fell heavily on the home turn while looking for position, and sent the jockey to the hospital for several weeks. The horse was destroyed. In 1973, Bold Master, a gelded son of Bold Ruler, appeared to have the race won in midstretch when, for reasons which have never been satisfactorily explained, he attempted to leap the inner rail (perhaps a swan's behind caught his mindless eye) and eviscerated himself neatly against a coincidentally placed furlong pole, thus ending not only his career but any chance at the romanticized Triple Crown. In 1976, Big Dipper and Candy Chief finished in the first and only dead heat in the history of the Triple Crown races,

an incident which gave rise to the famous photograph which the President himself, the first fan of horseracing, displayed during his inaugural address to the television cameras as an example of the unity which could come through shared effort. Still a further oddity, remarked upon by the President, is that both horses were sons of Candy Spots and that they were ridden by brothers, Robert and Richard Marshall, apprentice jockeys. This is only a fragment or two of the fascinating lore and history of this tradition-laden race.

Some of the horses who have won the Belmont are: Sword Dancer, Jaipur, Damascus, Marking Time, Citation, Quadrangle, Swimming Hole, Ponder, Needles, Native Dancer, and the famous Military Hit. Some of the highly publicized horses who have lost this race are: Northern Dancer, Fabius, Bold Master, Ridan, Crimson Satan, Admiral's Voyage, Smash the Sea, Determine, Dedicate, My Dad George, Run to Mama, and Majestic Prince.

Many other oddities and tales about the Belmont are on file in the nest of clippings which I am bringing home and they may be studied at leisure. I have prepared a tasteful collection which combines scholarship and genial cheer in a fashion which will amuse and titillate even the uninitiate.

I trust that the aforegoing will prove: a) that I am not in the least unbalanced, b) not disconcerted, c) not alienated from the situation, and d) can write a level, undisturbed, Headquarterese prose with the best of the other operatives. The style adopted through the run of this report was exhibited only in order to put a little bit of—ah—color into the narration which would otherwise fail of the true import of what is going on here.

Plenty is going on here.

What in hell *is* going on here?

CHAPTER XIV

Fourth Recitatif (*Confessional*): Gentlemen! I have sinned. That is to say that the scar of my sin must be glowing darkly before you at this moment, hanging bloody and wet as a dashed pennant before your eyes; should you ever find, of course, and ponder these notes. Otherwise, my sin glows not at all and who would have it any other way? Who cares? What is the difference? My sin, in any event, is that as you now see I have failed to work in strictly chronological order and thus the narrative sense of some of this may have been a bit confusing from time to time to time. To time.

Order, gentlemen! Order! I can understand this. In my day I have grown to cherish order, praise it, enact it myself at all the myriad levels of possibility, to realize that it is order and order alone which so to speak stands between us and the impenetrable nightmare outside; order between us and the Engulfing Pit and yet, knowing all of this, I flout it with a certain elan, one could even say a certain kind of arrogance. After all, who can best decide what is to be done in a given situation than the operative on the planet, on the very planet! And if my tone takes on somewhat of a giddy air, if my characters seem to have perhaps decompensated themselves a little more dramatically than strictly necessary under the circum-

stances, still, who is best qualified to say what is and is not necessary: the bureaucracy or the operative? Come, gentlemen, think! I hear the rustlings in the abcess, I hear the sounds which can only be cheers. The operative! The operative! The humble, struggling, incorruptible operative!

After all, gentlemen, what did you expect? We have not taken on the upper classes of the society; we are not dealing with those cool, contained, ratiocinative types who have done so much to bring this state of affairs to its ghastly fruition. Rather, we are dealing with a simpler and altogether grimmer type, and if they tend to sweat, palpate and curse somewhat more than the average, then we must understand that they have their reasons! Reasons! Or, as the saying goes in this unique and pastoral land, as the saying goes indeed: horses for courses.

We are dealing with the events as best suited. You can see that I have kept the Objective firmly in mind from the beginning and all will capsulize appropriately on Belmont Day. During the Belmont itself, as a matter of fact. But we get there by most circuitous roots: Mary through Julian and Simmons via Make Peace and Tony through crude manipulation and Gardner—well, Gardner via Thursday by means of other antecedents. But it does not matter for they all will come together at that vital and terrible moment when the fires begin to lace the air like maddened insects and the hiss of flame, intolerable in its beauty, becomes a gigantic drone like the expulsion from a hive, and from this hive will burst forth then the flowers of destruction, wild and terrible in their multicolored beauty, fires which catch the grandstand and then the clubhouse and then the tote board and finally the track itself, until all is seen to be shadowed in flame: the forms of the horses and riders struggling through the brilliance of orange, the flicker of tentlike brown which can only be the collapsing grand-

stand, and through the eye of the fire one will see forms, forms shadowed and lithe, brilliant and round, forms of all shapes and sizes, needs and fulfillment, history and connection tumbling through the fire's veil . . . and somewhere at the dead-center of all this beauty will come a solution so terrible—

Will come a solution so terrible as to make you proud of me gentlemen! Be proud! Take counsel! Be patient! The fires are coming!

It is impossible not to become really involved in the affair. One understands that operatives are to cultivate a certain clear detachment, a dignified removal from the source of their efforts which will enable them to regard the consequences with quizzicality to say nothing of some amusement. No less than any of my associates, not a whit less than any of my superiors, I approached the mission in that spirit. Remember, remember if you will what I did on Capella L, with what poise and facility I did the necessary there. Remember the torture bins on the Centaurs? They were conceived and structured from this very mind's eye, jewels of pain as it were, and I was there, I was there! and never a twitch to betray my excitement and my passion.

But this is different.

I have never dealt with anything quite like this. What I cannot understand, and it may be this factor above all others which explains my peculiar rhetoric, what I cannot understand is that these people are serious. They are *serious*. They believe that if they can, through dealings with horses, irrevocably alter their lives, then they have solved something basic, and if that alteration is not accomplished it cannot be, no matter what, their fault. Parts and parts of them, whole grotesqueries of limbs and psyches they feed into these deadly machines day after day, putting in and taking out (always less seventeen percent) and at the end of all this suffering and

penitence, involution and pain, will come, they believe, an apotheosis so profound as to yank them free from the trap of their passions and into a high, bright stratosphere of possibility.

It is this need for alteration which so seizes and maddens them, and if they cannot have it one way, well, then, they conclude that they will have it another. If they do not triumph over circumstance, then circumstance can only be their destruction. One has never seen anything quite like it.

They understand nothing. They care little of entropy. Questions of mortality and central fix in the universe do not disturb them. They are unaware of the greater principle of Cahn which states that it is the question of culpability which controls the destiny of races and that culpability is apportioned to the exact degree that they have aided the forces of entropy. (I quote from memory; Cahn's Law was always one of my interests but it has been many years since I wrote my paper on it.) They know nothing of the Lesser Laws of Straits which point out that for every act of grace there must be one of contrition in equal force, and therefore the duality of motives is intertwined. They giggle at the Five Principles of the Tork (which have a different name and numerology here but should be as devastating). All that they know is machinery. Machinery: putting it in, taking it out, exploding themselves again and again against that terrible wall and at the end . . . at the end, a missed angle, a lost step, a cowardly jockey, an unfortunate tip . . . at the end it is to those features where blame is ascribed, never to themselves. Ah, no, never!

And oh, the heat of the track: you cannot understand how it becomes in the late spring, gentlemen. It is somewhat nearer the shore than the central city but there is absolutely no breeze; it is airless, stagnant, a small flutter of frightened birds providing the only palpation, the

smooth, rich, even stagnancy of the flats coming over the track on hot days, the sense of enclosure, the stillness, press of bodies, heat of damp, clutter of collusion as ten by ten they stumble to the windows to make their next bet, heedless of their sweat. Disgusting! Distasteful! Cry calumny in the temple! Sing to me of evil and loss, the beauty of the ruptured heart!

But the horses are beautiful; they are the last innocents and perform their dumb chores with that kind of grace known only to the unconscious. The horses rise slowly to meet their destiny in the scarred center of the track, poised like dancers as they lunge toward the wire; this is all they know and they do it so well, so superbly well! Hardly can they be blamed for what is construed around them.

Chronology fails. Only the metaphysic holds. But it holds. There is little time left: one or two days left to this wretched assignment and back to the shores. They cannot touch me as long as I concentrate and maintain professional discipline. They cannot discipline me as long as I concentrate. They cannot know me as long as I choose to be unknown.

It is now post time. The horses are on the track. In the first race, there are no changes. In the second race, number four, Hot Sun, is a bay gelding, and number seven, Green Power, is three pounds over. In the fifth race, a change of jockey. In the ninth race, number two, Run the Gauntlet, has been scratched. Scratch number two, Run the Gauntlet. Daily double windows close promptly at 1:20, and in the first race . . .

CHAPTER XV

Mary enters the track through the grandstand gate and stands numbed for a moment before the tipsheet stand. On the train to the track it has been hot, has given all indications of being stifling and bright day, but now, at the track itself, some errant cloudbank has covered the sun to retract visibility. Standing there, Mary has the feeling that she has been struck blind (probably in retribution) and she gropes for her eyeglasses, doing a good imitation of a woman bravely overcoming her handicap. As she settles the eyeglasses on her nose, the cloud goes away as rapidly as it has come and Mary feels herself literally pinned by the sun, all areas of her body seeming to heat and brighten to the ground as waves of radiation pass through her. "Son of a bitch," she says, and puts the glasses away again. "Son of a bitch, you just can't make a buck." It is as if the cloud, a 7-5 shot, has passed on in the stretch just in time to be beaten by the sun, a popular because sentimental favorite.

"Bastards," she murmurs and goes over to the tipsheet hawker. He is a small man, perhaps five feet three inches in height, who stands on a crate behind the stand in order to give the illusion of normal stature, but Mary knows his secret as well as he knows Mary, and they look at one another for a few instants while the man performs

certain adjustments upon the hat he is wearing, pulling it down somewhat over his eyes. Mary's appearance seems to have sparked some core of the coy within him; he becomes winsome.

"Good afternoon, lady," he says. "What can I do for you today? A *Lawton*? A *Powell*? Schoolmaster hit the double yesterday, maybe you'd like to try that one. He's kind of a new item, just a kid, but he shows a lot of promise."

Mary shakes her head, puts her hands on hips, looks the hawker straight on until his gaze wavers and fails. "You have a lot of nerve," she says. "Do you know that?"

The man casts a frantic glance to his left and right (it is distressing to see how quickly they become discombobulated and for how little reason, the load of guilt they carry is that enormous) and sees that his partner is busily occupied in selling the *New York Turf Letter* to a businessman who cannot disengage his hands from a large blonde woman sufficiently to pay for it. The partner reaches over and gently extracts a dollar from the businessman's pocket, sees Mary then and says, "What did you say? What is it lady?"

"I said you have a lot of nerve," Mary says. "I been meaning to tell you that for a long, long time and you'd better hear me. Playing on the hopes of people like this. Telling them lies. You know that if any of these guys had decent information, they wouldn't be selling it for a buck. They'd be in there laying the bets on. Disgusting! Preying on a poor, helpless, lonely old woman who only wants a little bit of help. All of them liars and thieves. There is no information. *There is no information!*"

"But you're wrong, lady," the hawker says. He takes a *Lawton* and shows it to her, stabs something with a thumb. "You can see right here that this clocker hit the third and fourth races right on the nose yesterday with his Preferred and Most Preferred, and then here he

comes back in the ninth with a $24.80 winner. Lawton's been at this for nearly thirty years, lady; he has bad days like any of us but they all even up and he's ahead. He's a real pro, Lawton. You got to have faith."

The hawker is appalled. He is having, although he tries to conceal this, a very bad time. Firstly he has never before spoken with Mary. (Their surprising sense of intimacy comes from sight and not from dialogue; this is the kind of thing which makes certain horseplayers feel that they have an understanding with a given horse or jockey.) Secondly their dialogue is beginning to attract a small but interested clump of spectators, all of whom look at Mary with something approaching fondness. It is as if she is speaking now for a large sector of the horseplaying population and Mary, sensing this, feeling a rising sense of power and accomplishment, says, "Don't give me none of that filth and lies. I know everything that's going on here. I been playing the horses myself for thirty years, girl and woman, and the whole thing is crooked. If any of you bums had the answers, you'd be inside making them and not trying to hustle six bits from a poor old woman who is down to her last couple of dollars. If you were men with any sense of respect and real cleanliness, you wouldn't be in this in the first place. You'd be doing something honest with your time. I bet you write all those sheets yourself, right, you bum, and sell them under different names, giving seven or eight horses in each and every race?"

"Lady," the hawker says, "lady please. I get five cents a sheet. I'm just trying to make a living, I never even *seen* the guys who do this stuff. I just get deliveries from some kids and try to do the best I can; what I can't sell I turn back and what I do sell I get a nickel. What are you laying into *me* for? I don't know who Clocker Lawton is, I never even saw the guy let alone know him, so if you got any problems—"

"Hah!" Mary says, pointing vigorously, "you admit it then. Clocker Lawton don't even exist. Listen, he admitted it!"

"I didn't say that. Of course he exists. I mean, he's writing the sheets, ain't he? Someone is writing the sheets and it ain't me. Hell, I don't know nothing about horses, I won't even play them. In my whole life I played a horse once and lost five dollars and that's it lady."

"Bum," Mary says. "Bum!"

"Please. Lady, please, lady, show some mercy, we got customers—"

"Oh no," a tall man says from the edges of the crowd. "That's perfectly all right. We'll wait. We want to listen to this lady."

"I'll tell you a thing or two," Mary says, raising her handbag and removing some coins from her interior purse. "I'll tell you more than a thing or two, you just wait and see. You're all filth and merchandising, that's what you are. You ain't got no proper sense of compassion."

She places seventy-five cents on the counter, picks up a *Lawton*. "But just to show you the kind of woman I am, the kind of spirit and pride I got, the way I always pay my dues, I'm going to buy your disgusting filth. Just to show you that I don't waste people's time or mislead them the way the rest of you do. To show that I got some respect. I care. I have compassion. *I follow through on what I say.*" This is not quite the reason of course. The fact is that Lawton's having named a $24.80 winner has excited Mary. Otherwise, she would certainly have tried *Rowe* today.

Vaguely conscious of dim approbation, perhaps a handclap behind her, Mary wanders through the alley under the grandstand, takes the old steps leading to the lawn. Then she moves abstractedly into the grandstand enclosure, reading *Lawton*. She thinks for a while of tak-

ing the escalator to her usual place in the grandstand but decides not to. A woman of her age should keep in condition; no reason at all to restrict the physical activity since it brought on heart disease. This is an unusual day, definitely a critical day, in fact it is a pivotal day, and the thing to do is to get a proper start and break bad habits. She goes to the bar in the rear of the enclosure and orders a beer, pays for it with a dollar, carefully puts away all the change and drinks the beer in slow, even gulps while she ponders *Lawton* further.

As always he is sticking to the chalk. There are a couple of interesting possibilities in the turf race but for the most part and predictably Lawton is once again picking horses which would have been favorities anyway, horses whose odds will be 3-1 at the most, 7-5 in the probable, and it is hardly worth seventy-five cents to Mary to see what is happening again to the timeless Clocker Lawton. Some time long ago, in his youth, Clocker must have had a disturbing series of incidents which had forever afterward made him doubtful of adventure and eager to clamber onto the familiar. Yellow should have been his color except that Powell picked it up.

Nevertheless, she thinks, one can never quite tell. Occasionally some of Lawton's choices do float up to higher odds and then, too, the real purpose of buying *Lawton* (she remembers) is to continue her file, her perfect file of *Lawtons*. It will be interesting in a few hours or more to look back upon this sheet and to understand that the mysterious, legendary, shrewd old clocker, no less than she, does not know what in hell he is doing and is vulnerable to whimsy, devastation, and the perverse. She places *Lawton* in her pocketbook with a sigh and resigns herself to the fact that there can be no answers from there.

She asks the bartender, then, if he has any information. Mary, like many regular horseplayers, believes that

track employees (even the very humblest) are privy somehow to mysterious information, are hooked into some central sense of connection, have tapped sources so private and powerful that their jobs are meaningless to them only insofar as they keep them busy during the days and near the action. The bartender, for reasons of his own, has never tried to discourage this kind of misapprehension. (It leads to larger tips, although occasionally, very occasionally, horseplayers will come back to him later and complain. In that case he will say that Johnny or Joe had changed instructions at the last moment and decided not to go for it but next time for sure. . . . This enables him to string out his relations with customers indefinitely, although there is an aspect of intricacy, to all of this which makes his intellectual life, perhaps, somewhat livelier than he really wants it to be.) He says that he is not sure, not completely sure, but Floral Park in the fourth looks pretty good and that he, the bartender, is taking a flyer on the 5-3 double. He assures Mary that this is not to say that 5-3 will win, but on the other hand he isn't covering it because he expects it to lose either.

(Indirect dialogue is such a refreshing change of pace, gentlemen, I should have thought of it thousands of words ago. It enables distancing and in their case it is a pleasure.)

Mary explains that she is a very old woman who has been betrayed by her son. She has brought him up to a successful marriage and a prosperous career and now, when he has no more use for her, he has turned away. It is disgraceful. The bartender says that this is probably so, children being what they are these days, but the 5-3 double looks as if it might stand up; the figures on the five horse are particularly promising. He has just come from a track at Dover at which track he breezed an easy five furlongs in :58 3/5 unblinkered. As far as the three

horse in the second race, the trainer, Miller, is thought to be one of the shrewdest and most corrupt men working out of Aqueduct and the horse is bound to win someday, why not today? Miller himself thought so highly of the horse that he bought it for himself from the previous owners, this being the kind of inside information you could pick up if you kept your eyes open at the track. Mary says that she noticed the very same thing in the *Telegraph* last night. (She is a liar however; she never reads the *Telegraph*, the figures frighten her and the excess of information strikes her as the sheerest numerology: mystical and insane.) But you could never tell about shippers and trainers; they were too inconsistent. She orders another beer and tips the bartender fifty cents, explaining that thanks to her son's real ingratitude, she is in severe financial straits and must win herself out today or be gone from the racetrack forever. Forever and begone, she will fly away like a filly dispatched to the farm in heat. Perhaps she is getting a little drunk. The bartender says that this is altogether a shame but simply part of the whole generational breakdown which has led to the mysterious youth vigilantes and the dangerous, hostile closed worlds of the commune. This bartender seems to have a shred of social consciousness or maybe it is only that he cannot pick winners and has been forced to educate himself instead.

Bedazzled in any event by this sociology (Mary knows that there is something which might be called an "outside world" but it has, at best, always seemed a bit of a nuisance), she downs her beer quickly and asks if Make Peace does not have a tendency to quit in the stretch anyway. The bartender says that he does; he has shown this tendency many times before but Miller has been tightening him up for months and is probably ready for the crackdown today. They nod at each other with sensations of power drifting between them, a true sense of col-

laboration. Two customers come over, holding *Telegraphs* and mumbling to one another and the bartender serves them at the far end. He comes back to Mary to say that he has now considered her problem and all things kept in the balance, he could now advise her to bet the three horse in the second race particularly heavily; lay off the double because of the uncertainties of Dover but go heavy into the three. Mary thanks him and tells him that he is a lovely man who understands old women and their terrors. She tips him another thirty cents, getting a house beer in return. (The house beer is absolutely remarkable, a one-a-year-occurrence, but the particular problem of this bartender is that he has always wanted to be loved and has found so little of it; perhaps this is why he gives so many tips. It is not a question of venality but abandonment.) The bartender says that the beer is his pleasure and he wishes her luck.

Mary is quite definitely drunk at this point. She has absolutely no capacity for liquor, the poor lady, and she has not eaten at all today; also I am making myself lively in the cerebral hemispheres. She staggers from the stool beaming and wanders off toward the infield. Halfway there she realizes that she has left the *Lawton* on the counter and returns to retrieve it. The bartender is reading it assiduously and hands it to her with a shamed grin. "He seems to spot the same horses in the eighth as I do," he says.

Mary returns to the infield and notes that it is 1:15, five minutes until closing of the Daily Double windows. She decides to heed the bartender and lay off the double. Instead, she will bet the number three horse in the second race heavily and bail out in that fashion. The trainer is shrewd and in any event she deserves to win: God would not let her lose after all that she has gone through. She will take half her winnings to Julian and throw them in his face. She checks her handbag to make sure that

the five hundred dollars is still there. "Son of a bitch tip-sheet bastard could have stole it," she mumbles but without conviction. She knows as well as I do that the hawkers are too shy to make dramatic gestures such as theft. Under pressure, they flutter like birds.

Horses come onto the track for the first race, examine Mary with mute disinterest, and wander up the track. She follows them, bumping hard into a thin, gangling madman hanging over the rail by his elbows, frantically trying to control his trembling forefinger as he points it at the tote. "Watch it goddamn it lady," Simmons says. "Don't you know where the hell you are?" Mary says that she is sorry but certain people should learn that they don't own the entire area of the rail, even on Thursdays. They part from one another with some loathing, not understanding the great compact in which they are soon to be united (just as well). Simmons, shaking his head, decides to go off the chalk this time.

Mary looks over the rail for a while, then goes to the windows and makes a two dollar show bet on the number five. She finds it impossible to watch a race without having a bet of some sort down. She feels that this would mean that she was somehow losing control of her situation. (Overall her "interest" bets have done somewhat better than the "serious" ones but this is something which I would never point out to her, being of a rather sensitive nature overall.) She pushes back through the crowds, mumbling and cursing, the *Lawton* flapping in her hand and stands near the glass doors to watch the first race, putting her hands on various ribs in order to separate bodies.

The Lawton horse wins it. Lawton's second choice finishes second. The five horse, closing rapidly but caught between horses is third after all. There is an objection but it is disallowed and numbers go up on the board. Through all of this Mary waits patiently, singing

beer songs. The five horse pays $7.80 to show, very mediocre for a 42-1 shot but it is, after all, $5.80 more which she will be able to put on the fervent nose of the number three. She walks with some grace to the payoff window, feeling that she is bestowing favor upon multitudes of losers she passes and waits for her payoff. The $7.80, clinked deeply into her palm from the hand of the mutuel clerk, has an aspect of blame to it and Mary rubs it almost lasciviously as she drops the seven dollars into her purse. The eighty cents she takes to her bartender and exchanges for another beer plus tip.

He nods and says that Willie dropped in the news from the backstretch exactly one minute before post that he did not like the conditions at all and would not be going with number five today. Perhaps next time or the time thereafter. The third-place finish is to be considered a kind of gift from Willie to the across-the-board bettors, a small reward for their willingness to limit their greed. The bartender says that this kind of thing can happen anytime at all but the number three still looks very solid to him and he has not had any advice yet to the contrary. Perhaps if he does he can catch her. He goes to the other end to pass some rye and whiskey over to two tough-looking women with sagging breasts who are examining the program and giggling about the peculiar names of some horses.

Mary sighs. She now finishes her fourth beer. She is staggeringly drunk, well beyond her means but I will maintain some reserve about this matter and not be unduly clinical. She goes to the hundred dollar window which is unoccupied except for a thin man in front of her and a Pinkerton glaring from the left, his eyes turned inward toward some awful knowledge, his badge glittering in the flicker of the inner tote. The man in front of her is talking earnestly to the clerk. "Come on, come on," he is saying and with some reluctance tickets appear, ten of

them in fact (Mary, in drunken compulsiveness, counts the whirs) which the customer seizes.

"Where's the money?" the clerk says. "You haven't given me the money yet." The Pinkerton stirs, examines the situation and grumbles.

"Don't you trust me," her predecessor says and places ten one hundred dollar bills on the counter. "There," he says, "there." The Pinkerton's eyelids flutter and he mumbles. The clerk disgustedly counts the money, raps is on the counter, and puts it in the till saying something about insane horseplayers who not only make asses of themselves but feel that mutuel clerks should have to *trust* them and put up the tickets before they put up the money. This appears to sadden the clerk (who has always had a higher vision of humanity then his position can perhaps sustain) but not the Pinkerton who now whips a program out of his shirt pocket and begins to study it assiduously.

"Yes lady," the clerk says, looking at her through a suddenly acquired eyeshade, "You'll put down the money before you order the tickets, OK? It's not that I don't trust you or anything like that but I can only take one scene like that a day, lady. It's in the contract. There's a condition in my heart about tension and also, lady, what we don't get paid for we have to take ourselves. That means a very steady man has to be at this window or else you could wind up betting hundreds and hundreds of dollars on every horse in each race and that isn't good."

Despite the fact that hundred dollar clerks are known to be relatively proprietary about their business and their customers, this intimacy is a new experience for Mary and she takes it as a good omen. (She has no choice; she has never been at the hundred dollar window before, even to run bets.) "The number three," she says. "The three horse in the second race—five times."

"The money, lady," the clerk says, "the *money*," and Mary extracts it from her handbag. Five hundred dollar bills, her sinking fund, all the money she has, and she lays it carefully in front of the clerk like an offering. Involuntarily her hands clasp, she bites her tongue, nibbles her upper lip. At this doomed moment she tastes a wafer.

"Three?" the clerk says and she nods. He pushes the key five times, very carefully, and tickets emerge slickly, coming from the machine in the way the pellets of feces (Mary yet has a scatological mind) slide cleanly out of the rumps of nervous horses when they approach the starting gate. "Three," the clerk says and hands the tickets to her. "Five times. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Five times on the number three. Five hundred dollars. One. Two. Three. Three again. Four. Five. Five hundred dollars. Correct, lady, and good luck. I happen to know that the three in this race has a good chance," and the clerk bestows upon her a perfectly wonderful and merry wink.

Mary takes the tickets and clutches them to her, then deposits them in her handbag and wanders off toward the infield. Halfway there she thinks about yet another beer but a deep, glowing belch, grinding out of the very center of her and seeming to send out slivers of fire reminds her that she is dealing with certain issues of mortality about which, perhaps, it is wisest to maintain a sort of deference. The hell with the beer, it only exhausts the heart anyway. She looks at the tickets, verifies the number by the winking lights of the tote, and goes out again to the track. The horses have been warming up for some moments and are already circling into the starting gate for the mile and an eighth race, staring at one another sullenly. "Come on, three," says Mary hoarsely. She had meant to shout this but is surprised at the noncooperation of her vocal cords. It seems as if she has lost mo-

mentarily the power of declamative speech. "Oh come on, three," Mary says, "come on!"

I speak to her then, I say, "All right, Mary, here we go. You're hooked in deep now, eh?"

She looks at me with revulsion. Then the knowledge hits her like a blow and she gasps but it is too late, the bets are placed and there is nothing she can do. "You," she says, "*you*—"

"Too late, Mary," I say cheerfully. "Consider the odds, however. Just think of them."

The gates spring open and the horses lumber out. "You bastard," she says and the race is run, truly contested all the way for all its cheapness and the three shows a certain rigorous grace, a good deal of courage for once and certain moves as well but for all his efforts he cannot improve in the stretch drive, and hanging on for all he is worth finishes third, beaten five or six lengths.

"Son of a bitch," Mary says, stunned, as the official light goes up. "Son of a bitch."

"Sorry, Mary," I say. "It was after all not very nice of me but it had to be done. Besides, the horse was an overlay at good odds and you had a run for your money, what the hell?"

"Oh God," she says. "Oh God," and a rotting belch springs from her stomach, her hands spring to her heart, her head sinks to her chest, her body folds around her chest, her knees fly toward her face and rolling and rolling on the infield lawn, Mary thinks that it may be a heart attack after all (she has waited for it so long) but at the center knows that there is no such luck. It is only an attack of hysteria or guilt or something because, otherwise, why would she be laughing so? Laughing, laughing; laughing to split the sun, and in the third race there are no changes.

It is harsh doings and fills me with a twinge of pity

but there is no other way in which it could have been done. Now Mary knows too. The third race is to be won by a 10-1 shot whose form Mary has been watching for some weeks and whose name she had escaped in the program. She would have bet him heavily win and place. She would have won over three thousand dollars.

CHAPTER XVI

The roots of Gardner's condition are not quite as easy to assess. The interesting thing is that he comes from generations of horseplayers; his mother and father were brought to divorce through the ministrations of the track and his paternal grandfather (although he has never heard this) was a bookmaker in the Old Country many years before Gardner's time. By being mistaken for an important secret service operative by the wrong people, the grandfather, it can be said, joined a long succession of people who have given their life for art.

His mother and father on the other hand were relatively less rigorous cases. His father was a longshot stabber and his mother an adherent to the chalk, and it was this more than any other factor which wrecked their marriage and sent them springing apart some months before poor Gardner was even born; his father committed suicide by leaping from the roof of the old Jamaica grandstand one afternoon when a long shot which he had taken himself off came in.

In recrimination, his mother swore off the horses forever and Gardner had to find the pursuit on his own as it were, recapitulating all of this ontogeny with a mad phylogeny of his own which would see him, some seventeen years after his birth, greeting his home from work

with the word that he had gone to the track for the very first time and had liked it very much, so much in fact that the seventeen dollars he had lost were not even a concern to him. His mother's reaction was so painful that, more than a decade later, Gardner cannot still bear to think of it; since that one painful scene he has never again discussed horses with his mother. For that matter, he has not seen her for some years. Her obligations, she told him, ended when Gardner went to the track for the first time and so it is a testimony to his motivation that he was able to get himself through the city university of his choice. Exhausted, he had joined the civil service after his seven-year career in this university and for the first time found that he had betting money. The rest is understood to be inevitable. Since he has not seen his mother for years, Gardner is always promising himself that he will call and perhaps some day he will but it would, I have assured him when we discussed the subject one time, make no difference either way. His mother has a frenetic terror of horses to this day; Gardner would have nothing else to give her.

The pure fine blood of generations of horseplayers can thus be said to course restlessly in Gardner's veins. It is not only his psyche which he brings to the rail when he cheers one of his horses on but his very heritage, a melange of history going back hundreds of years (his paternal grandfather learned everything he knew from his uncle) and which in terms of cultural tradition and lore should be almost overwhelming. But the sad fact of the matter is that Gardner has inherited not only his doomed family's interest but its ill luck, and he is (I say this in all sadness) one of the worst serious horseplayers in New York City, having been embarked long since upon a losing streak so grim and vicious that it can be assumed to be a direct reflection upon his intelligence and not his desires. Gardner wants to win, but, he is gullible, super-

stitious, panicky, ignorant, and impatient and time and again he forgets the lessons which he feels that he has so painfully learned and has paid for so expensively. He becomes unduly excited by tote board changes, he allows women at the track to excite him, he looks for information in the bottom of urinals, and he feels that the Stevens counter clerks know him and are out to get him personally. Gardner has long since made the track a mad extension of his own interior which is not so damned placid to begin with. Gardner. Pity Gardner! Consider him if you will and try to understand the perspective.

It is the series of lessons he has learned, as a matter of fact, which Gardner now recites to himself as he drives his ancient car to Aqueduct on this fine Thursday afternoon. Free from compulsory duty in the office by virtue of a new procedure, freed by virtue of the car from the various unpleasantnesses of the subway, Gardner feels as always that he is entering through damnation into apotheosis. The car was purchased as an investment in concentration and he is now trying to instill within himself that cold and bright band of logic which he knows must light his path home. Don't bet longshots to win only, Gardner thinks, always back them up for place twice as much as win. Bet odds-on favorites to place only. Never bet fillies against males under any conditions. Never bet a horse moving up in class after a good race. Never bet a horse moving down in class after a bad race. Watch out for jockey switches. Never bet a horse carrying more than three pounds over the weight he carried in his last victory. Watch out for four year olds and up that have engaged in driving finishes in their last two races.

Watch for last minute flashes down on the board, he reminds himself. Look for a well-spotted horse from another track moving down at least a thousand dollars in class and with a leading jockey on him. Never bet horses that have been claimed for the first race in new colors.

Insist that a horse has had a workout at least twice during the past seventeen days; on the other hand, pay particular attention to horses that have no workouts whatsoever listed in the past performance line because the trainer may be trying to cover up something. Forget any horse overweight more than two pounds. Do not bet unknown jockeys on horses in the 5-1 range. Gardner continues this litany, achieving in some parts of it a genuine fire, others a rather mechanical sense of iteration. All of it is quite interesting, adding as it does to my own observations, opinions, and insights about the track and there is very little of it which should be disregarded—even though Gardner, under normal circumstances, will certainly forget every word of it the instant he comes to the track and sees that A Certain Horse which he has been following is listed in odds of upwards of 10-1. Of things such as this is Gardner's destiny woven, all of it richly tapestried from his history.

One can conceive of generation after generation of disasters which have somehow conspired to bring about this modern Gardner who sits singing in his old Torquefast, spacing out his encouragement with high-pitched bleats which are understood to be limitations of bugle calls. Gardner is an optimist. He knows that somehow he will, on this very bright afternoon, win all the money for Virginia today and then he will be finished with the horses forever and the two of them will be married. *Married!* From their loins will spring a succession of dour and uncomplicated children all inheriting Virginia's stamina and Gardner's intelligence, none of whom will know or care that workouts in even furlongs of twelve seconds each usually are the key to a hard race on the succeeding day.

Gardner. Gardner! All kinds of impulses spring to mind and memory. One would (if one only could) reach over the seat and give him an encouraging pat on

the back to put him in the proper cheer for this afternoon's battle. Or perhaps one would remonstrate with him, try to lead Gardner to understand that the kind of answers which he seeks at the track are generally for people far older and more self-enclosed than he. Or perhaps one would merely want to join him in his bugle calls which have a certain rustic charm and in their imitative aspects come close to giving a good representation of the track. But one does none of those things, one does instead what one is best suited to do by nature and custom. One must understand limitations. So one talks.

"Gardner," I say, "you have to be reasonable. You cannot win all the money in an afternoon. You would need thousands and thousands of dollars in order to recoup your losses, give you some savings and provide you with the kind of margin you would need for Virginia to quit her job. It's far better to be realistic about this. Try to be realistic. You have to do this thing in small quantities. You wouldn't expect, after all, to make a year's salary in a day, would you? It takes time."

"Of course not," he says, "but this is different." He shuts off the radio which has been giving the news in a low rumble behind the bugle calls. (If there is one thing Gardner possesses it is unfailing politeness.) "Nothing's impossible. Listen: if I can run a ten dollar *show* parley through nine races, I'd have a thousand dollars. And any idiot can pick a show parley. That's no real challenge at all and it doesn't mean a thing. I could do it anytime I wanted if that was my kind of thing. A ten dollar place parley on the other hand would be five thousand dollars at least and any idiot can pick a horse which will finish second. But I'm not going to do that either."

"What are you going to do, Gardner?"

"I'm going to bet every cent I have on Make Peace in the second," he says. "I've been watching that horse for months. He ran a good third in Florida not even six

months ago and since then he hasn't done nothing but the trainer's been bringing him along slow and liked the horse so much he bought him from the previous owner which trainers rarely do. Miller is smart. Now he's running the horse back against thirty-five hundred dollar pigs for the first time and that's the angle I wanted. I mean, it's *proven* that the horse can win in this class because he already proved he can beat better; it's a matter of timing, of knowing when they're going to go for it seriously, the dirty bastards. I figure that today's the day. They can't ride him forever, they claimed him after that business in Florida and they've carried the damned horse along ever since. Today's the day. Today's the day! I feel it. I *know* it. It's got to be!" He slams his fist to the steering wheel and simultaneously navigates the car cunningly into the right-hand lane to be prepared for the exit which is less than a mile away. "He ought to be thirty to one at the least. But I figure much higher than that."

"Cinnamon Roll's got a chance," I point out.

"Sure he's got a chance, sure he does; he's the favorite for one thing and favorite's always have a chance. But it's too good on paper, too good to be true. The horse finishes second beaten a neck four days ago with seven thousand dollar horses and yesterday he works out in :46 so you know he's sound and the dropdown in class is because they want the purse badly. It's *too* good," Gardner says and slams his fist on the wheel again somewhat less indolently. "It's just too good to be true. The horse figures to win so there's no way he can, that's the way they rig these cheap claiming races."

"But listen Gardner," I say with enormous calm and a kind of ease. "I point this out with sorrow but Make Peace was entered in the second yesterday. He was running against four thousand dollar horses then and what he did was to run off from the starting gate and must

have rapped himself somewhat seriously because the stewards scratched him out."

"Aha!" Gardner says, "that's precisely the point. And now they bring him right back so he can't be at all hurt. They pulled that whole little scene yesterday to build up the odds for today. What the idea was was to make him look as bad as possible, but they're bringing him right back, aren't they? They aren't even laying him off over the weekend! The next day. The next day! The horse has got to be ripe if they're pulling off something like that. And he takes another drop in class. Aha! That ought to build up the odds to a pretty penny. It all fits in with my theory, that's what it does."

It is really quite hopeless. Nevertheless I say, "But you see, Gardner, the stewards will never scratch a horse for running off from the gate unless they have reason to believe that the horse is unsound and that he hurt himself in the excitement. They may be bringing him back today only to find out how badly he is hurt and entering him in a race he can't win because they know that they won't lose him. Or more likely, come to think of it, they *want* to lose him and figure that an angle like this will surely draw a claim. It isn't safe, Gardner. I can't call it gilt-edged. It's all really suspicious. I feel it's my obligation to warn you to stay off the horse, you can't predict this kind of thing."

Slamming the car out of gear and coasting through an underpass, he says, "So, what's safe? You know it's all a swindle anyway. So what the hell, you have to stab on something long and hope for the best. It's the only way."

It is this aspect of dualism in their function which I find the most thoroughly infuriating. They will enunciate logic, defend it, struggle to acquire it, seek, enfold, and manipulate; they will justify all of their acts, when they choose, under the tenets of logic and then at the least likely time and for the most perverse of reasons they will

deny it and lurch instead toward mysticism, the occult, the laws of chance, the question of fraud, etc. It is as if this constant swing between empirical order (or the faith in it) and subjective chaos is their own carefully prepared metaphor for existence, developed with some cunning over the course of years and years, evolved painfully and with intricacy as the sum of many experiences and the result is chaos—absolute chaos. This is the most depressing aspect of the situation: one can simply not *reason* with them. They are not rational. They will do the strangest things and call them logic, do the most justified in the name of impulse.

"All right, Gardner," I say, "have it your way then. I'm just trying to be helpful and enable you to see angles that you may have overlooked. I consider it my duty." Gardner, at least, accepts me. Our relationship from the first has been distinguished by its cordiality. This is more than can be said of any of the others and it enables me to forgive him many things—although, you can be sure, not quite enough to do him any good.

"Yeah, I understand that," Gardner says, "but after all, you're just along for the ride, you explained that part already, and if you're just along for the ride, then you've got to give me room and let me do what's best. I know what I'm doing and it's necessary. You've got to have respect for the fact that I know what I'm doing and that I came to it the hard way. After all, I've been chasing them man and boy for ten years and I should know a couple things. Stick with me, and you'll see some angles. Of course, there's nothing personal in this; if you got some other business you want to catch up on—"

"No," I say, "I'll stick around. That's perfectly all right." I have brought him to believe that I am a special projects director for a psychological research firm conducting extraordinary research under government grant and that I have been able, in my technical pursuit, to

succeed in the routine transference of my consciousness to other minds. Precisely why such insanity should seem credible to him and why the matter has been so informally granted from the beginning is anyone's guess, surely not mine. It may have to do in part with the fact that Gardner himself works for the government and in that context one can accept the possibility of this agency doing almost anything.

There is another reason of course. Gardner has cheerfully courted insanity for many years and welcomes concrete manifestation of the fact. There is no point in being insane (Gardner cheerfully believes) unless you have something to really show for it and now he most certainly does. Auditory hallucinations. (The racetrack does not count; he sees nothing insane about it.)

"Stick with me, chief, stick with me," Gardner hums, pulling onto an access road and passing several competing cars in a dangerously low arc while he up and down shifts in a rich full clang of gears. "Stick with me, chief, you won't be sorry. No sorrow on the morrow, for Gardner's going to town." He is always this way before he witnesses the first race. Sunken into a gleaming optimism, all possibilities fraught with meaning and spread before him, Gardner succumbs to his more realistic state of mind only when he has actually passed through a series of occurrences which manage to wipe out of mind any recollection of the previous idiocy. This means that there is no possibility, anywhere along the way, of Gardner uniting these separate selves and managing to apologize—to me, to his history, to his girl. I understand that in certain cultures this constitutes a perfect definition of the schizoid condition but I do not have enough to say on this to make myself of much interest.

Gardner, singing, hauls the car past trees and dogs, housewives and children, greenery and bonfires, past an intersection and then into the main parking lot of the

racetrack. He pays the attendant three dollars for parking and then, instead of swinging left toward the grandstand lot, turns briskly right, heading toward the preferred. A surge of liberation accompanies this simple act for Gardner has decided to treat himself. He will be a huge winner this afternoon and the extra money will mean nothing. He pays the sullen attendant and puts the car in back of the clubhouse, wedging it in with an evil glint of satisfaction, between two large aircars, leaving small scratches on the left rear door of one. The attendants will be blamed for things like this. He gets out and in a curious, skipping gait (his anticipatory amble) pays his way into the clubhouse and taking the escalator finds himself an excellent seat on the first level, overlooking the finish line. It is the first time he has ever been to the clubhouse.

Gardner is humming. It is a very old popular song about shrimp boats: "Shrimp boats are a-coming, their sails are in sight. Shrimp boats are a-coming, there's dancing tonight." Gardner is hurrying home. He is hurrying, hurrying, hurrying home. Apotheosis approaches. Gardner can see his destiny hovering, singing, in the air.

CHAPTER XVII

Tony looks at the weaponry without opinion or interest. His eyes glaze, his limbs are waxen, his movements stiff. What I have done is effective but I have the feeling that perhaps I have pushed past some unnecessary limits. It is all to be regretted but on the other hand, Tony has served his function and now must do some work.

"The assembling, Tony," I remind him gently. "The fuses. Put those fuses inside."

He rubs his hands, sighs, looks toward a corner of the room from which a roach scuttles in astonishment, stamps out the life of the roach with deliberate flinging ease and then turns back to the grenades. "Fuses," he says. "Where are the fuses?" His hands dangle over them without impulse.

"Get them Tony." And so I assist him. It is not difficult, in this state, to guide his old hands into the appropriate gestures. The weaponry itself is childishly easy; there is nothing to it at all. Hands which have broken a yearling into the gate and which have worked many a frightened gelding in the slop are capable of doing it easily. Slowly, lovingly, with many caresses and blandishments, I guide Tony through the act of assembly, my words of praise like the gentlest of woman's gifts, small kisses on the wounded core of his psyche, my murmurs of encourage-

ment as distant and beautiful to him as the colors of the horses now streaming before him on the backstretch of their delight, moving toward their last home, the glow of the finish wire suspended like a necklace in the dusk.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I can't stand it," Mary says. She is not sure of her whereabouts but she believes that it might be a bar. The bar seems to be empty and this means that she can talk to herself without embarrassment, but on the other hand the hell with it. Who listens? Who cares? Where are the feelings anymore? She is very drunk. "I can't stand it anymore," she says again, "I really can't take this. Who can take it? All of them bastards driving you crazy. I won't live with it. No one should."

The bartender, wiping his hands slowly on a towel, turns toward her menacingly and seems to be on the point of having a dialogue. Hastily I make several clumsy adjustments and he returns to his glasses. On an impulse I force him then to remove an unopened bottle of rye from the cabinet, twist the cap free, and down several ounces in two gulping swallows. He chokes, but then accommodates himself. This along with the adjustments will settle him for the time being.

"No way," she says. "Just no way at all."

This is where I come in. "You don't have to take it, Mary. There is a way out of all this you know."

"Don't have to take it? Way out?" She is really stupefyingly drunk. It has been a slow process of accretion, moving from the second race to here, a process involving

easy transitions from beer to rye to mixed drinks. She shakes her head uneasily, feeling that it is somehow disengaged from and yet menacingly near her body. Small implosions rock her joints; she shifts on the stool. At the fringes of her consciousness death peeps out to cast a hopefully quizzical look but then retreats discouraged. "What's that? Way out? Speak sense to me now, will you? Can barely hear a thing with all that buzzing. Come on lad, speak up, speak up. You have something to say? Then just say it!"

"You can be free, Mary," I point out. "You don't have to put up with this again. No more longshots, no more blind switches, no more bastard jockeys, no more crooked trainers. No more hot horses, no more tiring in the stretch, no more bearing out. Think of it! None of this, none of any of it, just a straight ride into peace and release."

"Well then, what is it? Come on; I'm listening. Don't tell me about that bastard, Julian. I won't even hear that bastard's name mentioned to me again. Not ever. He doesn't matter."

"It has nothing to do with Julian. Listen, Mary; it's a way out of Julian too. It's a way out of everything and it's so easy. All you have to do is to see it."

"All right, then," she says, gesturing with her left hand. She knocks over the glass of liquor which runs unheeded down the bar. The bartender regards this with some interest but then decides to make nothing of it. "The hell with it. I'm listening. What do I have to lose? What do I care anymore? I know that I lost my mind with all my luck."

"You can break free, Mary. You can have your life the way you always wanted it to be and the answer was in front of you all the time. All you had to do was to look."

(It is truly shameful that I must lead the poor, drunken subject on in this fashion. One would hope for

somewhat less dissimulation by this time. But it is necessary. Only by building the requisite sense of attention can I be sure that she will pay heed when the time for revelation comes. The details are quite simple but they must be explicit—and then too she is, as I have already said, quite drunk and I am not really responsible for that part of it. By proxy as well—all right, I shall admit it—I am rather drunk myself; it is difficult to maintain contact with a mind in this condition without feeling the dismal undertow.)

"I'm looking," she says. "I'm looking now, damn you."

"It's just a question of bringing it down," I say. "Making sure that if you can't beat it then no one can. And there's nothing to that because it's been sitting on disaster for two hundred years."

Then I talk to her explicitly, persuasively, subvocally, patiently, documenting all of my observations. She listens with swollen eyelids, an open-mouth. Once or twice she moves to protest weakly but I quickly dispose of that by pointing out that anyone in her position would be glad to do what she is in a position to do and would consider it an honor. Besides, she has no choice. Mary nods and agrees. She removes, at length, the used *Lawton* from her handbag and ponders it for a while, the names of the horses weaving mysteriously in and out of her consciousness, names of Preferred and Most Preferred seeming to obliterate the necessity for further thought. "And they both run out," she says. "Both of the sons of bitches run out. That goes to show you about Lawton, doesn't it? He doesn't know what the hell he's doing."

"No," I say, "he does not."

"I don't even think he exists. I figured that out today. It's a hoax, the whole thing. There's no Clocker Lawton. It's all made up."

"He exists," I say. "I can assure you of that."

"I ain't never seen him and he ain't never done me no

good so there can't be none. He's just a bunch of guys in a back room somewhere knocking out hot tips. He don't exist."

"But he does. He does."

"Well he doesn't know what the hell he's doing even if he does exist."

"That's right," I say with some passion. "Yes, yes, that part of it is a fact. None of them know what they're doing. They stumble through their lives with the schizoid glare of maniacs. They enact their lives in the way that inferior jockeys try to survive in tight quarters, holding on, just holding on and creating for themselves the illusion of alternative, dreaming as all the holes close in front of them, seeing their history collide and recede in the background, staggering through an endless stretch with dirt and film kicked back at them, the wretched fog of the flats filling their nostrils with a scent that they must call ambrosia. That's how they live their lives, do you know that, Mary?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You talk too much for me."

"Then concentrate."

"What does that mean?"

"The stupidity, the calumny, the sheer waste of it," I point out, somehow caught by my rhetoric and unable to stop, but for all the good that it is doing I might as well be the liquor glass itself. This would have more effect. Still, I am entitled to some expression of my views; I have taken far too much of this and for what end? How much can I take? I have feelings too, gentlemen. I suffer, I react. I am not your run of the mill agent. For all of this time I have kept my views tightly wrapped within, scuttling in the bottle of self, observing everything, questioning nothing, performing the slow, slick moves of manipulation, retracting that cold and bold edge of myself from event because only in that way were it possible to

achieve any kind of reason. But I am entitled to better than this. How far are *my* limits, goddamn it?

"If they could only understand the waste, Mary," I say, "it might be better because then they could face the sheer bankruptcy of their lives and do away with themselves but they cannot. Oh no, that is not for them! Instead, they interpret the waste as accomplishment, the loss as annealment, the denial as grace, the suffering as passage, the corruption as change, the wickedness as transition, and immersed in this sea of rationalization they traverse slowly and awkwardly to a kind of doom which would absorb them totally were it not that they can supersede even doom having found so well other ways of doing past themselves. Nothing extrinsic to these people. They make their own hell."

"You talk like some kind of a conservative."

"I don't think labels are the point, Mary, that's too easy."

"Well, you got to have sympathy. Whatever it is you're saying anyway, you got to try to have some feeling. Horseplaying is a very tough racket, you know. It's all rigged against you from the beginning and you get nervous."

"It's more than the horseplaying," I say, "it's everything," but then I feel a kind of twinge, it is infuriation passing by because the fact is that she is right in more ways than she can possibly guess and I add, "Well, you can beat it if you only showed any patience but they don't have it," and try to drop the issue. I have gone too far, for once. Even I can see that.

Mary, however, is on top of me and asks, "How can you beat it? You have a system? Tell me how do you get around it?" It is the first time she has talked to me with any interest, let alone passion and although most of this can be ascribed to liquor and despair.

I find myself pleased enough to say, "There's a very

simple, basic method Mary but it's too late for it to do you any good now. The money's all gone."

"Yes," she says, "yes, yes, but just tell me, just so that I know I knew it. I have to know."

What the hell. I give the bartender a cautionary look and then a precautionary jab in the medulla oblongata just to make very sure that he is out of commission. "Well, if you must know, you have to play favorites to *place only;* you consider only favorites and eliminate those that failed to finish first or second in their last races and that system will show you a twelve percent profit over the long haul with no other adjustments necessary. If you tinker around and put in a distance condition it goes up to fifty percent but you get less action of course."

"Favorites," she says with some contempt. "Favorites? Oh hell."

"It isn't spectacular, Mary. The prices are terrible as a matter of fact, averaging only slightly over $2.80 but it's the only foolproof system there is and it's tight."

"Favorites," she says, shaking her head and nearly falling off the stool, "Why I wouldna bet that way even if I had knew it. What kind of a cheap hustle is that? That's no way to beat the track. It's no fun! It's just like investment or something."

(I sigh. They are really all the same at bedrock, Simmons has the same difficulty, so does Gardner, they have contempt for small winning prices because they believe them to constitute some kind of a judgment of cowardice.) "Well, it's too late anyway," I say, "so forget it. Anyway, if you had used the system and become a very rich old lady you wouldn't be having nearly half so much fun."

I proceed to remind her of what she must do. She is extremely drunk and beginning to belch back liquor now, wavering on the very edge of sickness, and I must talk very slowly, calmly, expansively indeed, but after a

fashion my words permeate and I know that she will be all right. Her role, in any event, is a relatively minor one, peripheral to the basic adjustments to be made by the others, and I know that in the crux she can be counted upon. When I am quite sure that everything is in order, I allow her to pass out over the bar, cradling her old head in her thin hands, sighing, sobbing, and smiling wearily as slumber licks at her.

The bartender grunts and collapses, afflicted with another kind of somnolence. I leave this *menage a deux* with some regret but move to scenes less pastoral instead as things begin to move, lurching toward a definite conclusion. Only a little bit more now. Certainly, I can hold on.

CHAPTER XIX

Gardner stands by the clubhouse rail with two hundred dollars worth of win tickets on Make Peace in his shirt pocket. His good intentions to the contrary, he has found it impossible to remain in the clubhouse to watch the race. Too much is invested, his confidence to the contrary. He stands by the rail now instead, beating his thin fists on steel and reciting small cheerful rhymes to himself composed of popular song and scatology: moon and June, spit and bit, whip and shit. Gardner mumbles and then checks the odds on the board again: Make Peace is holding steady at a little over 40-1. Eight thousand dollars for Gardner if he wins. Capital enough to marry Virginia and abandon the races, he decides. He begins to sing again, more sentimentally this time, trying to dredge up dim memoirs of old handicapping hints or special angles to compliment the songs but finds that his mind has somehow been drained of pedantry at this moment. It is inhabited only by winding snatches of lyric and a kind of empty anticipation.

The horses move by in a stiff gallop, one by one, and Gardner and the jockey on Make Peace exchange what Gardner hopes is a look of true understanding and level communion. "C'mon, Jean," Gardner says in what he had intended to be a brightly encouraging tone but the

words come out in a dull, stentorian rasp, which frightens him, and he hawks out phlegm in a series of choking sounds, wondering whether he may have a fatal chest disease. "Boot 'em in, Jean," he says with somewhat more volume, and the Frenchman casts back one quick glance over his shoulder and then whips the horse out of sight. Cries from the clubhouse, as Jean knows, are always to be more heeded than the grandstand grunting and Jean seems to respond, his buttocks move far up on the horse and he briskly bounces a couple of times, making Gardner think of intercourse and entrance. (This is his terrible problem: while engaging in sex he thinks of horses and while playing horses he is apt, at the oddest moments, to be seized by lust.)

Gardner searches for more rhymes, finds that he has nothing left to sing and quiets. He fumbles the tickets and feels them seem to somehow bulge and enlarge as the winking tote now cheerfully whispers to him of eight thousand dollars. Eight thousand dollars. *"Eight thousand dollars!"* Gardner says. "It's an angle!" and reminds himself to definitely give the payoff clerk a hundred or so when he collects. It is the least gesture a gracious winner could make for an employee.

It is a splendid, chastening scene, this, and one which I could observe without boredom for hours and hours but there is no time to enjoy it. Of them all Gardner is the only one who truly interests me, who I inhabit comfortably, and whose every action I find meaningful. As always, one remembers that business is, after all, business, and the controlling sense of mission must decide. "Gardner," I say easily from the background, then strolling into the forefront of his consciousness as I continue, "Gardner, you do understand that you don't want to win this bet, don't you? That has got to be made perfectly clear."

He jumps. He has not been expecting me. Usually we

do not converse at the races themselves, settling instead for prognostications and post-mortems. "Huh?" he says. "What's that? I thought you had gone. What do you want now? I can't talk; I'm really kind of involved now. Why don't you come back after the race and we'll talk then? That would be the right instance; really, I'm just kind of tied up now and I think—"

"No time," I say, and then add rather unkindly, "bullshit. Gardner, I must make it perfectly apparent to you that winning this race could only constitute an absolute disaster. Fortunately you have no chance and we can expect that in terms of that loss, things will take a somewhat inevitable course. But before all of this is done you must understand that you truly can't afford to win. You don't really want to win in the first place you see, and in the second place, winning would destroy you—absolutely destroy you! Luckily for you, you subconsciously apprehend most of this already and that is why you're such a successfully inept horseplayer. But we can't leave all of this to the subconscious, Gardner, we have to get at least into the preconscious levels of inference, motivations, the blending of will and activity; this is the least that can be asked of you."

"Come on," he says. "Get out. Out! Not now. Sooner. We'll talk about it later. Later, I told you." He waves a hand in front of his eyes, having localized me apparently toward the prefrontal lobes of his brain. His tone has become harsh and strident and that casual amiability which has distinguished almost all of our dialogues until now has departed.

"Soon enough," I say. "First, however, a couple of things must be made understood, Gardner. You see, if you won this race and collected eight thousand dollars you would no longer have any excuses against abandoning the track and marrying Virginia. And the painful fact is that you don't really want to do either, Gardner. Let's

have it out: you're a suppressed homosexual, your relationship with this girl comes only out of a sense of justification and you wouldn't know what to do in a productive situation if you fell into one. Winning eight thousand dollars just to face this kind of stuff isn't worth it, Gardner. Cheaper to drop the whole matter, not that we can anymore now."

"Listen to me you evil son of a bitch, I don't know what—"

"Oh come on, Gardner," I say wearily, "I've really been very patient and kind throughout this affair and my patience has had severe strains recently. It's just about gone, as a matter of fact. I want to break this to you gently and help you prepare yourself for certain eventualities but if you want to get nasty I have that capacity too. You've misread me and my motives from the start Gardner. You thought I was a whimsy or projection. I'm not you know. I'm quite something else."

I show him what else I am. For the first time with any of them, I remove all barriers, all controls, and let myself be looked upon. This would destroy Mary or Simmons or Tony, but Gardner is of stronger stock and has a trace of intelligence and can handle this although barely. I let him look at me in full for some five or ten seconds, turning in profile so that he can see a suggestion of the edges, then wheel back to full confrontation. I show him other things. I show him what Virginia is and what she means to him. I show him what he has really been doing when he thinks he has been copulating with her, I show him the basic significance of the horses. The horses are demonstrated to him in terms of their essential needs and purposes instead of those kindly rationalizations with which Gardner has spaced out his afternoons at the track. I show him their pain, their anger, their fury and that for which they are only a metaphor.

It is this, not surprisingly, which proves to be the most

shattering part of it. Gardner covers his face with his hands. "Please," he says, "please don't do it. Please stop. Please!" The covering action means nothing of course (the pictures being internal) but I take pity on him, not for the first time, and clamp down the shield.

Gardner stands by the rail gasping, retching, inhaling choking mouthfuls of air which seem to pollute his lungs and cause his consciousness to balk. "Oh God," he says. "Oh God."

"I'm really quite sorry, Gardner," I say, "but I can't be taken for granted. There are certain things going on here which are too important to be mishandled. The stakes, as you might say, are a bit too large. I wish we had the time to let you win or lose the race and work through to your own conclusions, but this might take forty or fifty years and that kind of time simply isn't available. I've got too much invested in you now though to abandon this so we'll just have to do the best we can with what we've got. The best we can with what we've got," I repeat, and cast an eye down the backstretch. "Well, Gardner," I say, "it is now post time. You might as well watch the race. Go *on*, Gardner, watch the race. I don't intend to do anything more just now so enjoy yourself."

He looks toward the backstretch numbly. In this instant of extremity he seems not to care or perhaps I am missing certain points. I do not know. Clearly, he does not eye the tote board, if he did he might note with interest that the unfortunate Make Peace holds steady at 40-1, making the eight thousand dollars still visible but Gardner seems to have lost at least temporary interest in the race. His mouth sags, he tries to form words but cannot. His eyes blink and water and he rubs them. (I did not mean to have quite this kind of effect upon him but, gentlemen, what else could I do? Time is running short. Short!)

The horses come out of the starting gate in a kind of suspension, hung in the air in slow frieze and Make Peace dodges into the middle of the pack. (How bored one could become with writing the same race several times! but it is a fascinating race and, like the Scriptures, the riches are endless.) "He's rating him," Gardner might comment in other instances but at the moment Gardner is saying nothing. I say nothing as well; races are interesting and always pleasant to watch. Along the backstretch, Make Peace can be seen to slowly poke his way to fifth or sixth coming slowly clear toward the middle and Jean rises in the stirrups with Gallic abandon, whips and flails at him. The horse seems to lose its action for a moment and then recovers, swings wide, comes behind a horse making a charge and in tandem they close on the leaders. Coming into the stretch he is third, beaten three or four lengths and moving with some vigor. "Come on, Make Peace!" I shout (the first time I have ever cheered a horse but then I have found it unnecessary until now, my patrons having taken care of all that for me), "whip and drive, whip and drive!" genuinely caught up in this Make Peace is not to fulfill his potential today; something seems to happen to his rear action (perhaps an errant dart of poison which I have thrown because, regardless of my emotions, he must lose this race) and the horse slips back on the track, throws it in without ceremony and staggers home third. The jockey, shaking his head, eases him under the wire. A peculiar look of frenzy haunting his enlarged eyes as he ducks in toward the rail and then up the clubhouse turn, the horse looks entrapped but this is as nothing to the rider who lets out a stream of curses which Gardner imagines he can hear. Perhaps he has taken the race personally. Perhaps Jean even thought that he had a chance to win. Who knows? Who cares?

Gardner turns slowly from the rail. He is changed. Gardner transmogrified looks toward the upper grandstand with sinking eyes. He still bears enough resemblance to the Gardner I have known to be, however, rather recognizable. "Two hundred," he whispers.

I say, "Believe me, it was really for the best, Gardner, completely for the best . . . you don't even know how lucky you are."

"Two hundred dollars," he says.

"You couldn't win," I say cheerfully enough. "Face it Gardner, you never really wanted this girl anyway. It was always something else you saw when you entered her, something terrible and bright at the far rim. Why do you think you were thinking of horses and odds and tote boards and spots when you were screwing? Do you really think that it was simple obsession? Come on, Gardner, you're a college graduate. What else was it, what were you touching?"

He raises a waxen hand to pick hair away from his forehead and says, "I don't know. I just don't know. I can't understand. Why did you do this to me? Why did you have to hurt me so?"

"Oh come on, Gardner," I say, "you're taking the whole thing personally, as if all of these events trigger in on you when they actually only concern you peripherally. "That's the end of the horses now and you're fine, just fine, never better and everything left to work. Come on; you've got five dollars left to go home with and plenty of gas in the car so let's just go out to the parking lot and have a long talk. We can sit in the car and do it right there. I have any number of interesting things to tell you and if we do it now we can have it all behind us."

"Two hundred dollars," he marvels. "Two hundred dollars."

"It's cheap at the price and besides, Gardner, if you

had won it only would have made things more difficult."

"You don't understand. You just couldn't understand. The *pain* . . ."

"Think of the universals."

"You stiffed the horse," he says, "that's what you did. Now I understand everything. You must have stiffed my horse."

"Oh come on," I say, "don't be ridiculous; do you really think that if I were capable of stiffing horses, Gardner, I'd take the time and trouble to deal with *you*? I'd have the whole thing all wrapped up by now."

This out and out lie is really disgraceful but procedure allows ethics to be defined as the situation warrants and it apparently gives Gardner some comfort. In a childlike and touching gesture, he sticks his thumb into his mouth for an instant, biting on it, and then makes his exit from the clubhouse, clutching the escalator handle as if it were handlebars. We ride down and on the way I begin to talk; calmly and soothingly, patiently and caressingly, I acquaint Gardner with the facts of the issue and by the time we have reached his car he is already on the verge of an accommodation. It is a painful thing to see how easily I have destroyed him but Gardner was the most submissive of them all. There has been no question of resistance. He is too lost, and now even the horses have been taken from him.

CHAPTER XX

Simmons, seeking extinction, has gone to a bar. (It is one in the same neighborhood as that which Mary tenanted some hours earlier.) Because his funds are limited, however, because he cannot in any way understand the mechanics of serious drinking, he has been sipping only rye and ginger ale slowly for the last several hours and now finds himself with a third in front of him, three dollars and change in his wallet, and a timorous understanding of the fact that he has not quite obtained what he has sought. With a cry of sheer self-loathing he opens the *Telegraph* again to the entries for the Belmont and looks at them without understanding. There are eight horses entered for the classic and he knows as surely as he has ever known anything in his life that one of them must win and that he is looking at the name of the winner right now, but he cannot, for the life of him, allow this insight to lift him the necessary step further into selection. It is this peculiar frustration of horseracing more than any other single factor which has so inflamed Simmons: the fact that the goddamned winning horse is always *right there* as ubiquitous as the losers and yet time and again the names of the losers seem to overwhelm, tantalize Simmons irresistibly and he has only, in retrospect, been able to deduce the offering of

possibility. There has, after all, been so little to separate him from a fortune: a flicker of eyeball, a trembling motion of the index finger, but it is enough to make a man cry. He could be Simmons in a penthouse now, or at least a townhouse, getting laid or otherwise disporting himself, and instead he is drinking rye and ginger ale in a goddamned stinking little bar in Flushing and has absolutely no idea of where he is going or, for that matter, of how he has reached here. Simmons would weep for himself if he were capable of self-dramatization. Unhappily, he even lacks that. He does not consider himself truly important any more. Bitter, bitter: it is really all too much.

"Sons of bitches," he says. This attracts no notice. Right and left, places are being occupied by men very similar to Simmons who are also looking at their copies of the *Telegraph* in hopelessness and rage, shaking their heads. The bartender (a wonderfully jolly fellow with whom I dare not temper; a mask so splendid should not be altered) looks at Simmons for a moment, winks at him, rubs a cloth over the counter and says something inaudible. "Sons of bitches," Simmons murmurs and returns to the form. (It is painful for me to note that once again he is becoming interested in the names of all the wrong horses. In extremity, he becomes even more fully himself. Clearly, I have done him a favor. This man has no future.)

"Hey pal, you're crowding me," the man on his left says and pokes Simmons violently in the elbow before he returns to the newspaper. "No goddamned manners these bastards," the man adds and it is this, possibly, which sets off Simmons. Certainly, nothing else which has recently happened could account for the explosion which now ensues.

Simmons mutated! Simmons reborn! Simmons raised to new levels of rhetoric and action! Simmons raised

from the cocoon and deposited breathing and wild upon the brow of the world! It is surely enough to move even a less reflective (or reflexive) creature than myself. It is astonishing. Simmons falls upon the man on his left like a horse devouring oats and before the astounded bartender or other customers can intervene, he has made several attempts to strangle him.

Action! Pounding! Force! The mortification of the flesh! (Surely and as you can see, it defies my simple narrative powers to recount what is going on at this moment; I have never been good at the rather distasteful physical scenes into which these people often move themselves. Enough, I will invoke transitions.) The victim, after a few, stunned instants, comes on strongly in the stretch, launching a rally of some force and dimension and begins to turn upon Simmons several skillful hooks and twists which come with stunning force into his pallid features and deposit him, in very little time, upon the floor of the bar, on which he begins to thrash and mutter. The victim, as if totally uninterested now that this minor source of friction has been removed (Even casual horseplayers have learned to function in this way; there are nine races a day, a thousand in a season. How much memory can one have?) shrugs and returns to his paper, mumbling about lunatics. Simmons is escorted to his feet by several men and hurled from the door with rapidity and some ease. He lands on the pavement on all fours, shaking his head. After a moment, his *Telegraph*, still folded precisely to the Belmont entries, joins him. He clutches the paper to his chest and staggers to his feet. His eyes glint madly. His mouth heaves. His hands tremble. Simmons has now hit what could be called the bottom of the ladder or possibly its apogee, the end of the rope or the top of the mountain.

Chest heaving, mouth salivating, limbs trembling, heart palpitating, Simmons rears back toward the bar,

puts his head into the door and screams, "You sons of bitches I'll get you for this!" and then makes a hasty, scuttling exit. He has got the customers all mixed up with trainers. "I'll get you, I'll get you!" he shrieks and breaks into full storming trot, moving down pastoral Queens Boulevard in the borough of Queens, New York, eyes fixed and staring, feet pattering, wind gasping.

"I'll get them," he says, "I'll get all of them. All of those thieving bastards." He stops suddenly, poises the *Telegraph* in his hand and then throws it with enormous force toward a random window. It breaks through the plate glass of a florist shop in a shattering burst and Simmons finds himself surmounted by gasping cackles as he looks at the ruin: the *Telegraph* has landed in a flower pot and is now surrounded by sprigs and sprigs of gardenias which have fallen to circle and seem to enshrine the newspaper with the delicacy and finality of an artifact. This is how, Simmons thinks, the newspaper might look if centuries later, alien beings came to Earth and began to order the ruins: the *Telegraph* would be granted a spot of honor by these ignorant invaders who would probably devote whole volumes to speculation on its origin and purposes.

(Simmons is an idiot. Any self-respecting member of that which his xenophobia terms aliens would deduce instantly what the newspaper had in mind and would only feel pity for a race still dependent upon numerology of this sort. It should have been pointed out much earlier that long long ago, before Headquarters itself, to say nothing of the Fellowhood, evolved, we had had something roughly similar to horseracing—and took care of it in the Fires. It is a transitional point on the way to a greater maturity until it begins to occupy the place in racial history which it does here. Then, somewhat stronger action is demanded.)

"Look at that," Simmons says. "It serves them right."

He is not exactly sure who the ones served right are but one can have some sympathy for the point of view. I understand this. Then sirens go off, whistles begin to sound, an alarm clangs with rage and fury and Simmons breaks his posture and begins to scuttle full tilt toward the subway. "The hell with them," he says, "I've had it. I've got a couple of dollars and I'll make a new start in life. I don't give a shit who wins the Belmont," by which he means only that he does not care about his inability to deduce the race but this is close enough. Simmons and I have voyaged far and wide together and finally we have come to a lovely intersection.

I say, "Do I hear you right, Simmons? Do I hear you correctly? Do you really want to bring the whole thing down?"

Hardly breaking stride he says puffing, "You again?"

"Who else? Of course it's me, Simmons, did you expect maybe Willie Corbellini?" (This is an old and cheap race-track joke but even at this moment of tension I believe I am entitled. For one thing I am bouncing around in him like a madman and for another the trap of Simmons is at last closing.)

"Yeah," he says, running, "I'd like to get rid of the whole damned thing, no question about it. It's lousy and it stinks and it wrecks all the households and starves children and it drives guys crazy. It's poison, that's what it is, but they got a whole new generation coming in there every week or so and thus it won't ever end. Sure I'd like to reunite the families and save the little children, besides that, I think that *Clocker Lawton* is a phony. There's no Clocker Lawton, no such person."

"You can, Simmons," I say. "You can end it. The whole thing can end, and the means are within your hands." An edge of triumph blares into my voice.

Scuttling upstairs meanwhile into an elevated subway, flinging coins into the cupped hands of an attendant as

he bypasses the gate, Simmons throws himself into an about-to-be-departed train just as the doors slam and with no loss of breath or continuity he says, "Tell me how, that's all. I'm listening. I don't care if I'm crazy or not, you just tell me some way that I can take care of this thing, get rid of it and I *will* because I can't stand it anymore! It's too evil and besides, you just can't work out a system that will stand up. It's too unpredictable."

"All right then," I say, somewhat moved by this new reformer's zeal which, as is always the case with people of Simmons's unsuccessful stripe, comes to the fore only when they feel in very bad need of reform themselves. "It's very simple, there really isn't anything to it at all. All you have to do is to go right to the center of it and undercut everything."

"You ain't telling me nothing," he says, rocking on the seat. "I mean, I don't get the words here."

"Don't worry about the words." I begin to subvocalize. I paint him pictures, provide him with a forest of images, a nest of metaphor from which easily spring thickets of speculation, the thickets in turn bear blossoms and I pick and cull these for him, talking merrily all the while. His mouth opens and he reacts with wonder. Two old women eye him strangely, a young girl out on her first date looks at him and begins to giggle. Simmons is oblivious. He is fascinated. He hears (or sees) me out, a process that takes only a couple of moments but which for him, subjectively, goes on for quite a long time.

"Well I'll be damned," he finally says. "You mean, that's all there is to it?"

"That's all," I say. "Of course there's a question of ethos and so on and so forth but that comes after the fact. The basic process is pretty much as easy as that."

"Why that's nothing! That's the simplest thing I've ever seen. You mean that that was all there was to it all

the time? That all I had to do was that and it would have been over?"

"Exactly."

"That all of this is going on, all this suffering and crud and so forth and it really comes down to that? So simple a thing? Well I'll be damned," Simmons says, and crosses his hands, looks down meditatively at the floor. "It don't figure," he says after a pause. "It's *too* simple."

"What's that?"

"I said, it's too simple. If it was that simple, somebody would have done it a long time ago, you know? It wouldn't have waited for me. It all would have happened already."

"No it couldn't," I say. "Let's consider that." I draw him another portfolio. This is a handi-pack, so to speak, and takes much less time.

His eyes widen and then glaze and finally narrow. "How about that?" he says. "How about that? That explains what you're doing here. Ain't that something? And you picked me. It's kind of an honor, I'll say that. That I would be selected and everything."

"You and a couple of others," I say. I beam under his praise. It has been so long since I have heard a kind word. Of course I have taken him far more greatly into my confidence than any of the others and perhaps more than I should have but then, I am entitled to certain prerogatives, am I not, gentlemen? There are limits to the abuse and rigor of any job. Then too, I have a right to establish an identity. "I must admit that you're my favorite, however," I add. "Of all of them. You have the most sensitivity and your mind seems to be the most—uh—receptive to what I'm doing."

"You don't say. You don't say, really? And you mean that something as simple as that would have brought it down all the time? As simple as that? It's the damnedest thing. When do I get to meet those others?"

"I'm going to take you to Tony right now. He and you will be working together as partners. The others will be at the edges."

"Tony's the trainer, right?"

"Right. He trains horses at Aqueduct."

"That wouldn't be Tony Miller, would it?"

"That's who it is."

"Well, I'll be damned. That's something!"

"My pleasure," I say. "I told you, I work efficiently. I take only the best people."

"Be damned. Son of a bitch," Simmons says quite loudly. The girl summons her date to another seat while giving him a look of terror. The two old women, on the other hand, eye him with modest smiles and begin to pat one another consolingly. Perhaps they think that Simmons is announcing himself. I regard the mixed reactions with some interest; it is so strikingly close to what I have myself contemplated. The girl begins to whisper intensely to her date and he shrugs, looks toward the ceiling of the car. One of the old women makes a circling gesture around her head which might have driven Simmons, even an hour ago, into murderous rage but which now escapes him completely. "Son of a bitch," he says somewhat more quietly. "Anthony Miller, the trainer. You mean, I'm finally going to meet that character. Isn't that a killer? You know how much money I've lost on that bastard in the past couple months? I been following him all along like he was related."

"You've lost eighty-six dollars and twenty cents on him."

Simmons rolls his eyes inward in astonishment. "Yeah, something like that. I never added it all up. You mean you know all that kind of stuff too? Everything I lost and all that?"

"Of course I do," I say. "Among other things, I'm a documentarian. It's a requirement of the job."

"How much have I lost since I got started back in this game?"

"You don't really want to know."

"Sure I do. Sure I do."

"Sixteen hundred and eighty dollars plus expenses," I say.

He shakes his head and rubs his hands reflexively. "Oh boy," Simmons says. "I knew it was something like that but that? Wow! No, it's no good. I got to get out of this game somehow. You're right. It gotta go sooner or later and maybe sooner. Why did I ever get back into it in the first place? I thought I learned my lesson five years ago for good."

"Do you want the answer? Or are you just making conversation?"

"Do you have the answer?"

"Of course I have the answer. I have the answers to everything, Simmons. There isn't a thing your miserable little operation holds down here that I don't understand completely. You can't slip a thing past me." (I seem to be slightly inebriate again. Perhaps it is merely the effects of being so close to two stinking drunks within a couple of hours. Although I am not at all susceptible to liquor it is possible that its emanations have an effect not suggested in the manuals. For whatever reason, it occurs to me, that I am beginning to get fed up with Simmons. He is all right up to a point but I can see why he has been forced into largely solitary activities.)

"Oh, you don't have to call it miserable," he is saying, "I mean, it's the only planet we got. You can understand that. Yeah, tell me. Why did I get back in this game in the first place? Don't tell me about coming in to make a fast buck, I know that part already. What's the other part? Is there another part?"

The train yanks itself into a station and groans open, four forms stumbling out. They flee into the night or

maybe it is only another car. The doors close again and we are alone except for the hiss and clutter of the fans which, of course, provide a ruminative background for our discussion. "Or is there another reason?" Simmons repeats, taking my silence for an unwillingness to speak when it is only gratitude because now the final hurdles have been leapt over with the casual grace of the good steeplechase horses. He has taken on the denouement himself.

"Surely there is," I say. "In fact it's the only reason; it's the basic from which all the other factors emerge. You came back to it, Simmons, to suffer, but your suffering had to be of a very particular nature. It had to be self-enclosed, you see. The ordinary kind of suffering you could find anywhere, it tenanted all the spaces of your life, but the thing was that it was diffused, it was uncontained, it spilled out everywhere, and that part was no good because the thing about most suffering that is unstructured and, clearly to be ascribed, is that it is so pointless. The nature of you people is to put up with anything, the worst horrors, as long as you could be assured that there is a meaning to it. But you couldn't find the meaning to your suffering, so what you gravitated toward was horseracing which gave you, at the least, a kind of self-containment. It gave you perspective. The rationalizations you couldn't find outside you could find inside. It isn't very nice to hit you so hard with all of this but you did ask for the truth you know and you might as well be a man and take it. Grow up, Simmons. It was a bad move leaving your wife I should point out. That really made no sense at all. She was cut out of the same material that you were. You could have had many years of contentedly playing the horses and losing together if you had only been willing to share your insights. But you thought that cutting her out of that part of your life guaranteed you importance. Well, that's your asininity

Simmons. One thing is clear and that is you cannot, as you have said, possibly win them all."

He shakes his head, poising on the seat and says, "It wasn't that way. I mean, it wasn't that way at all. I mean, I didn't come to suffer. The suffering came afterward because I was losing. I only wanted to win. I thought that you could win at the game and if you only could then—"

"Oh come on now," I say, my patience quite destroyed by this nonsense. "I have no respect at all for the way you're talking now. If you cannot assess the nature and value of your more unspeakable drives well then so be it, but at least be realistic. You're getting exactly what you came for Simmons. This is what you wanted all the time. You wouldn't know what to do otherwise."

Simmons sighs, purses his lips, shifts again on the seat and stares out the blank, dusty counterpane into the night. There seems to be an impression of lights in the distance or perhaps it is only another train passing and carefully he moistens an index finger, wipes it across the pane until a small spot clears and then looks intently through it. Forms seem to be struggling on the tracks, branches wave. The train hoots and plunges underground. "You don't understand," he says, "it wasn't like that at all. It was something else too, another part . . . but essentially you're right."

"Of course I'm right. I'm always right."

"I mean, it's too rotten. The whole thing, the corruption. It's got to come down, somehow, you're right about that."

"Of course it's got to come down. That's why you're all in this in the first place, to make it come down. But try a little realism, Simmons, won't you? That's all I can ask. Some willingness to come to terms. That's the least that can be demanded of a man in your situation.

Simmons puts his hands on his knees heavily. He stands, wanders toward the door, leans against it. The

next stop is the one that I have instructed for exit, as always he tries to be a little ahead of the game.

"You really know everything," he says. "I mean, I don't even dispute that. I see that you're right. I know that you see more than we ever can about every single thing and that you got to have the truth and we be wrong—but there is this one thing you don't understand, that's all. I swear it. I mean I know I went into it probably to suffer if that's what you say and I wanted to be unhappy and look for answers and all like that but there was something else too. Can't you try to see that?"

"All right," I say. "I'll try." I am ever willing to expand my notes, my research, my point of view. My omnipotence is only relative; there are some things which I can never know. "What was it then? Tell me if you want."

"Oh," Simmons says with a sigh as the train comes into the station, "it was just so beautiful. It was just such a beautiful thing, that's all. Can't you follow that?" He steps outside. "It was just the most beautiful thing," he says and then he goes into the night, shaking his head and clutching his eyes. Perhaps it is an emotional seizure of some kind although it might only be the dust. I follow at a respectful distance.

No less than he, I can understand the problems of emotional affectation and what it can do to all kinds of beings. Is not my own life and progress testament to the fact?

"It was just so *beautiful,*" Simmons says.

CHAPTER XXI

In Tony's room, Mary and he assemble the weaponry. They work with much effort, little conversation. I direct them idly from time to time, making sure that they comply with the basic nature of the instructions. Mary sticks her tongue between her teeth, tears apart metal, inserts wiring, closes things and passes on the materials to Tony who carefully feeds them through a large hole. The assembled materials are then put to one side and more are taken. Thirty completed bombs lie in one corner of the room. Ten more need to be assembled.

Mary is confused. She is not quite sure where she is, or precisely how she has gotten here, or what the point of it all is. (It has been necessary for me to use forceful and abrupt action to guide her to these rooms, on her own she might have lain in the bar for hours and hours but time is now running short and I have thus been compelled to intervene dramatically. This will damage Mary as it has already damaged Tony but it hardly matters.) Nevertheless, she works with some efficiency. From time to time they mumble at one another, most of their comments having to do with horses. I allow this since it cheers them on in their work. At some ease I lean in a corner and watch them. The concentration! The scuttling! It all bears a strange and amusing resemblance

to the gestures of horseplayers as they drink with one another before making their bets on the next race. The consequences are similar.

"Don't bet fillies," Mary says. "Never bet fillies against males and lay off the fillies in the girl races. They go into heat and like that and you can never know what's going to happen."

"An angle," Tony offers. "You got to find yourself an angle. Like every now and then the racing secretary will write a race that's just right for your horse and you know that he's had you in mind when he's done it but you can't ever let him know that you know because then it gets into collusion and everything. You got to watch out for those kind of races. The best way to get him to write one for you is to run and run and run your stock, even if it's all broken down, just so that the races can fill and the suckers feel that they got lots of bets, but how can you do that if some of your stock can't even take a crap in the mornings? All these horses are broken down. And then those big owners and trainers, they get all the breaks from the office whether they run their horses or not. Class. All they want to do is to go to the class. It's disgusting. If it weren't for guys like me there wouldn't be such a thing as racing but they'll spit on you each and every time."

"You got to watch routers," Mary warns, carefully inserting some dynamite into a tube (very carefully indeed), "when they get dropped down into the sprint races. The thing is that they almost never win, but the next time they go back to a route they lower the boom. Of course it isn't always that way. Sometimes it's even the reverse."

"You try to look for a spot," Tony says, "but you finally find a claiming race, say, your horse might take and there are three or four other bastards looking out at the same spot so nothing's sure. And then if the horse is

worth anything at all, they're just as likely as not to claim it away from you. What you got to do is to run a horse over his head or at the wrong distance for so long that he looks terrible and then kind of *sneak* him in somewhere. Usually you got to ship them out. But how does that pay? Then they lose their form in the vans." He taps some armaments together, whispers about vans, adds armament to the pile.

"Now a real good overlay, the kind of thing I like," Mary says, "is a horse that's been shipped in from some other track where it's done good and they slot it in a claiming level a couple of thousand higher and give it the same jockey from the old track. That's an angle. It's almost a sure thing. Of course it never happens."

"Now all your goddamned truckers are thieves anyway. They don't take care of the horses. And I know what some of the grooms do in those vans on the trips. I won't even talk about that stuff. You see, the fucking grooms got angles too. All of them bastards drink with each other every night and practice ways to stiff their horses for the other guy. Maybe we should of got them some goddamned pension plan, then they would take a little interest."

"And when a jockey pulls a horse in the stretch so instead of finishing fifth he's last, that means they're setting him up for another day. They don't like to whip horses that got a chance next time out. What you do is this: you get yourself a little pair of binoculars and sit up high on the grandstand and you can watch all that kind of stuff. Dozens of possibilities if you don't get eyestrain."

"No possibilities," Tony says. "No luck. Nothing to be done. The whole game is rotten to the core and then they blame us just for trying to make a buck out of it."

"Gotta watch everything. Gotta watch the tote board like a hawk. Look for the smart money coming in there with about a minute to post." Mary passes over another

assembly to Tony, he tamps it down, passes it to one side. And the arietta continues.

The arietta continues! I listen to it with warmth and affection. They have so much to say to one another and yet they can barely communicate. The interweaving of voices, the shards of speculation, the aphorisms and tips which would come from them compose a satisfactory primer for anyone interested in the sport of horseracing except that all of it is somehow contradictory and no one except the undersigned is listening. Their heads move in conferral over a particularly resistant piece of metal. They poke one another affectionately in encouragement. The scene is companionable in its warmth; it is truly unfortunate that neither is really aware of the presence of the other. Still, one must take what profit one can from the situation. Certainly, there is a good deal of information being bestowed in this room and if there is no one else to partake of it, then I most certainly will. I am of a saving nature. I do not like to waste knowledge, no matter what its source. Every loss a gain, every injury a thrust, every disaster an epiphany. Conservation of resources. The battle against entropy. Holding against the void.

In a few hours they are finished. The armaments go into two large valises which Tony has been holding in his closet for two decades against the necessity for a quick exit. The valises are locked and put into the living room near the door. Gasping, wheezing, Tony and Mary go to the refrigerator one by one, find themselves a can of beer apiece and drink it solemnly at separate corners of the living room. It is a situation ripe for lively social intercourse except that they are still very much unto themselves, even now.

"Lousy racing secretaries," Tony says, still interested in the issue. "The goddamned blueblood owners who

shit on all of us. The stinking jockeys, the fat exercise boys, the dirty grooms. The racing association. The government. The American Totalisor Company. The damned fire traps on the backstretch. Breeders with deformed merchandise. Yearling sales. Crooked auctioneers. Gotta go. The whole damned thing's gotta go."

"Hot horses," says Mary, "and crooked trainers. Horses that bleed or quit in the stretch. Favorites that don't run back to their form. Drop-downs that bear out. Early speed that don't carry further. Platers which lug into the rail. It's just gotta go. I tell you, I can't stand any of it no more."

"Ogden Philips," says Tony.

"Jean Cruguet," Mary says.

"Calvin Rainey."

"Larry Adams."

"Eddie Neloy and Horatio Luro. Pancho Martin and Sigmund Summer."

"Harry M. Stevens concession company. Olympia Parking service."

"John Cox Brady."

"Subway specials."

"Clocker Lawton."

"Clocker Powell."

"Assistant starters."

"Cruguet. Jean Cruguet."

"Julian," Mary says. "*Julian.*"

"Butazolodin."

"It's got to go," Mary says, "the whole thing. I can't take it anymore."

"Blow it up," Tony mumbles and inverts the beer can over his shoe, watches the liquid trickle darkly into the rug like the blood coming from the nostrils of an overworked horse. "Blow the whole thing up. It's no good anymore. It's just not working. It's not doing what it was supposed to do."

"They lied to us. Every single one of them lied to us. They said we could make it and we couldn't. It was all a lie. Every single one of them. Colonel Bradley. Charles Hatton. Tom Ainslie. They said that it was sensible, that it was somehow sane and decent, that you could make it that way if you tried. That it all came together. They knew the difference all along."

"They all lied," Tony says contrapunto, "every single one of them. They knew better. But they didn't care. They simply didn't care. The truth would have hurt them so they gave us the lie instead. They didn't care about us."

"The *New York Turf Letter*."

"The Totalisor Company."

"Got to go," Mary says. "The whole thing. It's got to go."

"It got to blow," says Tony. The whole works."

Now, in the darkness of the room, they see one another for the first time. Rising to that conjoinment their eyes stare, hands flutter, noses twitch. They confront. They see the other. They merge. They sink into one another, coming together in some strange unity of the spirit, something which, at extreme moments only I can provide. They aggrandize in a way that has never been necessary before. I am moved, even though I created it. (I take pleasure in my work. I do good work. I do.)

Tony and Mary no longer exist.

Tony-Mary breathes heavily, harshly, raggedly in the dawn. It blinks, flutters, gasps, rolls into itself. After a time it sleeps. The sleep is long and full, possessed of images. Birds dreaming in the night. Horses running in the gray of the dawn, hurtling on the training track, moving, rising, successive levels of speed and anguish as they try to bank the clock before it runs down all the way. All the way. One eleven and two fifths. One minute flat. Forty-eight seconds. One minute and thirty-eight. Thirty-five

seconds breezing. Two minutes handily from the gate. The sun comes over the track and dries the mud puddles, brings the hard brown dirt to the surface again where it will shine oh so brightly in the afternoon.

CHAPTER XXII

Fifth Recitatif (*Apocalypse*):

Now it is all seen before me: the devastation, the wreckage, the beauty and the death. Shattered bodies of horses, the corpses of horseplayers rolling at attention in the mud, still alert and poised to that shank of fire as it races from one tier to the next and then in a low, crumbling snort the track itself is imploded. Now, there is only this low, flat plain on which flesh, paper, and machinery mix and meld, shattered in the stink of ozone. All done, finished, there is nothing more here, but I look upon it for a time, contemplate all of it: the meaning, the implications, the consequences, and I do not quite know what to think. Two or three of the forms are still alive. They flop in the ooze, perhaps seeking recapitulation of their history, a primordial kind of adjustment. Terrible, terrible! I kill them indolently and with a kind of caress. High squeals from the shattered hulk of the totalisor, the tumultuous whine of the Stevens coffee-maker as it continues to idiotically percolate.

All done, gentlemen. Finished. Are you proud of me? Mission completed. My obligations are terminated and shortly I will return. I look through the wreckage quizzically, trying to find that one necessary artifact which I can enshrine as emblem of the mission, but there is noth-

ing. A torn program flaps in a hiss of expiration, I do not want it. I do not want to know the entries or the program of band tunes saluting the President. From the backstretch comes a high panicked whinny. A gelding struggles to its feet and looks dumbly about; sees what it has to see and screams in terror. He is not the only one. *I have forgotten the horses!* Behind the backstretch are stabled hundreds and hundreds of horses, horses stabled in the hulk of Belmont as well. They must be taken care of. They must not be left to panic and starvation, these innocents. Weeping, I perform the necessary. I have performed the necessary all along. Only the one basic act was outside my ken and now it is done. Simmons said that it was beautiful: he spoke of the beauty of it. They only love that which they can encompass with their hatred.

The horses are off the track, gentlemen. It is now post time.

CHAPTER XXIII

Gardner huddles in the upper grandstand, wrapped in his overcoat, shuddering against the wind and the rain. He has been here for several hours now in the same spot. Now it is almost time for the Belmont stakes itself and he consults his program, muttering and shaking his head. He has no selections. But then he has no money. He is merely waiting. Everything is going on schedule. Earlier this morning he had called Virginia to say that his final decision had been made. (He was almost inarticulate; much coaching and prodding was necessary from me to keep the conversation going.) "I lost everything," he said, "I lost everything and still I want to go back so that's your answer, isn't it?" The phone was silent for a while and then Virginia said she guessed that she had her answer and without saying anything else she hung up. (She was a limited girl, Virginia, but she had a certain facility for gestures which can never be slighted.) Gardner then went to his automobile and drove straight to Aqueduct, abandoning his usual prerace concert because there was nothing to sing and for that matter nothing to bet. His losses on Make Peace left him with little more than ten dollars, none of which is instantly available to him since it reposes in the savings account that he had opened for emergencies some years ago and toward

which end had been depositing twenty-five cents a week. He could have had a last shot at a parley but he has been screwed: it is Saturday. At the track he had parked the car about a mile from the lot (not having the money) and then had hiked in through wind and rain muttering all the way to the grandstand entrance where he had used three dollars for entrance, fifty cents for a program, and fifty cents for a copy of the *Telegraph*. He has only thirty cents left none of which he intends to wager.

It has been an unusual experience for Gardner, attending the races wholly without money that is, something which he had thought could never happen to him, although he has been aware, as has any horseplayer late in the days, that some of his companions' interest in the races is no longer empirical. Seeing the horses run in this way, taking part in them from the heightened and deepened alienation of powerlessness, Gardner has begun to understand for the first time what it might be like to be an imbecile wandering the streets of Manhattan on leave from the institution or a eunuch at an orgy. There is, as well, a feeling of culpability which he cannot escape (a responsibility for everything that is going on at the track since, having no involvement in the outcome, he can see the full picture) and also a sort of bizarre and tragic elevation. He had never realized until this afternoon what racing might really look like to the uninitiate. It is maddening and dull, insane to imagine that so much of his life has been wrecked by what was obviously an amorphous rite. In the bargain, none of the horses on which he would have bet has been anywhere in the money at all, increasing his feeling of disengagement. Gardner shudders and puts his hands deeper into his pockets. He is quite cold but he is not yet even into the Belmont and in any event, there is really nowhere for him to go. Nothing seems to interest him quite as much

as it did yesterday. He thinks for a moment of Virginia but then puts her out of his mind. He comes to understand (through my slightly mechanical aid) that he was never very interested in her at all and that it is just as well that he will no longer be involved with her, although he still wishes that this could have been, somehow, accomplished less disgracefully. Gardner is wistful.

He checks out the entries for the big race as the horses come onto the track, shuddering a little in the cold. The band plays *Hail to the Chief* for the post parade (once it was *Sidewalks of New York* but with the transfer of the Racing Association's authority to the aegis of Federalism and with the President of the United States now at each and every Belmont as a gesture of his solidity with racing, a move which has assured him of a wide range of support in what is unfortunately not a voting population) and the horses struggle up the track, jockeys flailing them to keep them attentive. There would be nothing worse than a disinterested horse in the Belmont post parade, and the air of somnolence which creeps from one or two of the entries makes the jockeys savage. They begin to pummel their horses and the entire field begins to chase one another up the stretch and into the turn. Jean is riding an 80-1 shot whose female owner, having failed with it in sprints and claiming races, now feels that the horse must have classic potential. Gardner sighs. It is a colorful spectacle and has a great deal of sentimental appeal, but somehow he does not feel really moved. He looks at the entries for the last time. As usual, they disclose nothing except that Jean's chances are somewhat limited. Still, one never knows.

This is the first two hundred thousand dollar Belmont. That amount of money has been added to the entry and eligibility fees in order to keep the race, in the words of the track management, competitive with most of the major stakes. In truth, the Racing Commission has been

disastrously cheap about this race for many years. There are now a multitude of two- and three-year-old races that offer four to five times the Belmont prize but the question of tradition has long been the Commission's retaliation for expense. It was only a threatened (but little publicized) strike by several trainers of promising entries which caused the committee to up the purse some twenty-five thousand dollars. The favorite is an ex-two-year-old claimer named Knocker who, after winning the Derby on a disqualification, took the Preakness driving by three lengths in the slop, and although there are certain sectors of opinion which hold that the horse lacks essential courage and can handle nothing other than an off-track, the conditions and the hope of the Belmont crowd have knocked him down to 2-5 on the board with only some seven minutes of betting left. Gardner extracts the thirty cents from his pocket and eyes it longingly. The odds would make him twelve cents but that is not precisely the point; it is a strange thing not to have action on the oldest and most prestigious stake in the country. Or so thinks Gardner but then his state is perilous and has been carefully moved to such a point that he can now barely function at all.

"Come on, Gardner," I say as the horses turn up the backstretch. "Enough of this. On your feet. Let's go." Unresistingly he stands and I urge him with several nudges and prods in the cerebellum towards an exit. "Time to get to work," I say, almost cheerfully. Gardner shambles along unprotestingly. His movements are somewhat uncoordinated, hardly reminiscent of the lively and spritely Gardner of so many racetrack successes but I have had to make a whole series of radical adjustments which have disturbed the synapses, and under the circumstances (this is not my specialty) I am grateful that he is ambulatory at all. I guide him through the exit and onto a long, high ramp. Gardner walks up puffing, fumbling

in his pocket for the thirty cents. The thirty cents has somehow become very important to him, comprising one of his few remaining connections. "All the way up, boy," I say, cajoling him, and he groans on.

At length we reach the very top of the grandstand, the rear balcony before the seating area that is, and as I urge him on his westward way he bounces as far to the left as he can and then walks down the shallow incline and into the very last row of seats. Because of the rain and huge expanse of track, this row is almost empty. In the middle, Mary and Tony sit surrounded by valises which occupy a chair between them. They look at Gardner without interest, then resume their survey of the valises, taking only small, greedy looks at the track from time to time. Gardner moves to Mary's right, sits beside her. She takes little interest.

I have reduced their minds to a small, tiny point apiece. The point is fine and concentrate, takes in only the valises and what must be done with them and I am able to abandon them fully now (they are really quite out of commission) to devote my energies to Gardner.

"Open them," I say. "Come on. Open those valises."

His head jerks and he asks, "What for? Who are these people?"

"No questions Gardner. No time now. Open the valises. Open them now."

He shrugs and leans over Mary, touches the brass locks and forces the first, then the second open. They fall apart easily to the sides, disclosing armaments. Mary and Tony eye it dully, licking their lips and then Tony runs a hand affectionately over a grenade.

"What is this?" Gardner says. "What is going on here?"

"You know what it is. You know exactly what it is. Now do what you have to do."

Gardner's mind struggles. I can sense it like a bird fluttering under my grasp and in rage (never expecting so

much trouble in the last moments from one so simple) squeeze perhaps a bit too hard. He succumbs with a gasp, still fighting. "No," he says. "*No!*" How does he manage it?

"Come on, Gardner. It's so easy. We went through all of this yesterday. There's nothing to it at all. Just come on."

"You're crazy," he mumbles. He is still staggering for the rhetoric of resistance even under this kind of pressure. It is remarkable but I have no time to be moved. "You're insane."

"No," I say. "I have a mission, that's all. I have a mission and I'm trying to be expeditious. Be reasonable about this. Gardner, really; there's no time to waste. Come on. Reach over. Take one."

In tandem, Mary and Tony humbly take their own grenades, look at them with intent and serious profiles, then wait obediently while I say again, "You too, Gardner. You're not cooperating. It's too late for that kind of stuff now. Just take one and be glad."

"But listen," he says, sweating, wriggling, gasping. "Listen to me, will you? You don't need me for this. You've got *them* to do it. They'll do it. What do you need *me* for? What have you done to them?"

"You don't understand, Gardner," I say, a little sadly, with circumspection and low force. "You still don't see it. I need a complete cross-section so that the fire can be total, I need every single representative of every sect and you're one of the four."

He moans and crumples. He reaches out a hand ever so delicately and tentatively for a grenade—and I help him, Tony helps him, Mary passes it across her lap and Gardner clutches it damply, groaning. The horses go into the gate up the turn for post time and the megaphones squeal. There is a clang.

The gate opens, the horses pour out and just as they

do so I give the signal, give the signal, "now!" and the grenades arch. (Oh it is so beautiful to see them! I have waited so long!) From Mary's hand and then Tony's and after a short interval from Gardner's as well, they are tossed down toward the track and just as they reach the lip of the first grandstand they explode in lovely, curling threads of fire and they dip for more grenades and Tony says, "Whoopee! Whoopee! Go get them you bastards!" and throws one which explodes off a customer's head. Mary tries to spot hers on the ears of the favorite but misses and destroys instead a Harry M. Stevens concession carriage waiting in the rain. And Gardner, the youngest and most vigorous of them all, scores a dead hit on the pink cap (white stripes, yellow sleeves, stars on the hoops) of Jean who was trying to make a move on the clubhouse turn and now it is almost impossible to see the track for the fire.

See the fire, the smoke, the anguish. The race disappears and faces begin to turn, burn. Heads and bodies, mouths open, pouring anguish. The President dies in his blood. More grenades and more grenades and . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

Simmons is standing on the lawn by the finish wire as the first bomb hits. The role he has been assigned is very difficult and testing and I can only hope that he is ready to meet his obligations as he turns, drops his hands, faces the crowd and begins to roar with enormous intensity. (The exertions to which I put his vocal cords will render them surely useless thereafter but under the circumstances this is moot. I only hope they will hold up.)

"I want you to know why this is happening!" Simmons screams. (I have selected him for the role of Explicator; nothing so well suits the basic didacticism of his nature and no one is more entitled to try to sum up the sense of this.) "I want you to know that this is no prank you sons of bitches. It's real! It's something that was planned a long, long time ago! It's too rotten and too corrupt and it has got to go!" Simmons bellows and, amazingly, despite the turmoil, he is getting attention. Certain members of the crowd, partisans to the last, cheer thinly, trying to distinguish horses up the backstretch. Simmons continues, "From this spark will come a fire and the fire will wage the world; world enough and time and besides, how much of this can anyone take? It's impossible! *Impossible!*"

Momentarily I leave him concentrating upon certain

important alterations in the clubhouse that demand my immediate attention and as I do so, Simmons breaks into the lovely litany which I have so carefully prepared for him.

"*Clocker Lawton,* we have sinned. *Clocker Powell* we have failed utterly, we are washed in the colors of our inequity. Oh *New York Turf Letter, Top Turf,* we have gone astray; plunged into a sea of darkness, we have lost our way. We have forgotten the lessons of the Fathers: no fillies against colts; mo maidens in straight claimers; no workout line, no bet. We have been greedy. We have chased longshots. We have failed to learn the awful lessons of the tote." Threads of fire frame him as if in a halo. "Verily we say unto you that we have lost our way, we are utterly cast aside, our bones are made to run out like sealing wax." Three owners are incinerated in the clubhouse bar, the charred fragments of the ex-favorite roll in the wind toward the swans. "Faith of our Fathers, Word of the Prophets, we are lost and cannot be found. In the dread machinery of the tote we faint from sickness, pray for your blessings. Oh may your mercy find us again!" Simmons shrieks, "and may we never stray from thy teachings, thy sacred Word, until restored again to the freshness of our youth, we play and gambol like lambs on the fields of all desire."

More bombs rain. Mary has fainted but Tony and Gardner are still going strong and Gardner in particular, with a series of two-handed efforts is showing real promise. "Pray! Pray!" Simmons says. One more hail of bombs . . . and now the lawn begins to heave, the very stretch to dissolve as the chain reaction begins, just as promised, right on schedule. The true and calamitous chain reaction, here it is! And now there are only forms, forms darting and screaming in the network of fire, and Simmons, his arms outstretched, seems to sink into the concrete and is utterly consumed. "We have sinned! We

have sinned!" his last words as he falls beneath sight and is lost. Mary topples from the grandstand and is gone forever. Only Gardner is left, chuckling madly as he opens the second valise with the atomic assembly, a merry light in his destroyed eyes as he connects the wires leading to the power plant and then skillfully he flips the switch and it is at this moment . . .

EPILOGUE

. . . that my mission ends. Their world, their personal universe, is no more. I feel a yanking, rending pain like nothing I have ever known before. When I come to my senses I am standing in Headquarters, sweating against a wall and they are looking at me. Hemmings and people even higher than he are looking at me and Hemmings is saying "You stupid son of a bitch, you weren't supposed to get *involved,* just set the machinery and get out. Now you've made reclamation utterly impossible. Why the hell did you take this *seriously*?" And, "You lunatic, what made you do it *that* way?" And things like this, oh just terrible things I can barely stand to hear and I smile weakly (oh so very weakly) showing them the scarred palms of my useless hands. And then they come toward me, all of them in a row, screaming and hissing at me and it is not difficult for me to understand, even a man of my limited mentality, that they are very mad. Oh boy, oh boy, are they ever mad! I know that my fuckup will be the talk of the Bureau for years and years . . . to say nothing of my imminent demotion.

Nevertheless, one tried.

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